JULY 35 Cents

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

a new story by

ELLERY QUEEN

Miracles Do Happen

Pat Stadley's
The Doe and the Gantlet

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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The cover illustration by Kelly Freas illustrates Pat Stadley's "The Doe and the Gantlet"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new story by

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***Miracles Do Happen***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen and Inspector Queen

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Witters were in desperate trouble. But Mrs. Witter had heard that Ellery helped the less fortunate . . . A human interest story about the little people and "the fell clutch of circumstance" these inflationary times.*

THE MOMENT HENRY PECKED HER cheek that night, Claire knew something was wrong. But all she said was a wifely, "How did it go at the office today, dear?"

"All right," Henry Witter said, and Claire knew it was not the office. "What kind of day did Jody have?"

"About the same, dear."

Henry put his coat, hat, and rubbers in the hall closet while the other three children hunted through his pockets for the candy bars he always brought home on paydays.

"It's the teentsy size again," little Sal lisped indignantly.

"I wanna big one!" five-year-old Pete wailed.

Eddie, who was ten and knew the financial facts of life, merely scuttled off with his share of the loot.

"Aren't you two ashamed?" Claire said to Sal and Pete.

But Henry said in a queer voice, "Why should they be? It's true," and he went into the back bedroom to see Jody, who had been lying there for the last three of her eight years.

After dinner, which was beans baked around an irreducible minimum of Mr. Scholte's cheapest shortribs, Claire put Sal and Pete to bed,

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parked Eddie at the TV set, fixed Jody for the night, and hurried back to the kitchen. She helped Henry finish the dishes, and then the Witters sat down at the kitchen table for their weekly session—Claire with her budget notes, Henry with paper and pencil and his pay check between them.

Claire read off the items in a loud and casual voice, and Henry wrote them down in his bookkeeper's copperplate. The prorated expenses—rent, gas, electricity, telephone, TV installment, life insurance, health plan, personal loans. The running expenses—food, laundry, Henry's allowance. The "extras"—new shoes for Pete, school notebook for Eddie, repairs for the vacuum cleaner. And then—in that dread separate column headed "Jody"—medicines, therapist, installment on surgeon's fee for last operation . . .

Henry added the two columns in silence.

"Expenses, $89.61. Take-home pay, $82.25. Debit balance, $7.36." And Henry's tic began to act up.

Claire started to say something, but she swallowed it. It was the Jody column again. Without the Jody column they would be in the black, have a small savings account, and the children could get the clothes they desperately needed . . . Claire shut *those* thoughts off.

Henry cleared his throat. "Claire," he began.

"No," Claire cried. "*No,* Henry! Maybe you've given up hope on Jody, but I haven't. I'm *not* going to send a child of mine to a state institution, no matter what. She needs her family—the love and help we can give her—and maybe some day . . . Hen, we'll have the phone taken out, or send the TV back. You're due for another raise in a few months. We can hold out."

"Who said anything about sending Jody away?" Henry's voice was very queer indeed, and Claire felt a chill. "It's not that, Claire."

"Then what is it? I knew there was something wrong the minute you came home."

"It's Tully. He phoned me at the office this afternoon."

"Tully." Claire sat still. Last year, when Jody had needed her second operation and they had exhausted the annual health plan benefits, Henry had been forced to go to a loan shark for the money. "What's he want?"

"I don't know." Henry reached for his cigarettes. But then he remembered that he had smoked his quota for the day, and he put the pack back in his pocket. "He just said for me to be at his office tomorrow night—at seven o'clock."

"But you paid him last month's interest on the loan. Or—did you, Henry?"

"Of course I did!"

"Then why—?"

"I don't know, I tell you!"

Dear God, Claire thought, nothing more *now,* please. She got up to go over to Henry and put her

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cracked and reddened hands on his thin shoulders.

"Darling . . . don't worry."

Henry said, "Who's worrying?" But he wished his tic would stop.

"Sit down, Witter." Tully indicated the only other chair in the dingy office. He had Henry's folder on his desk and was leafing through it.

Henry sat down. The room held nothing but an old desk and swivel chair, a filing cabinet, a big metal wastebasket, a costumer, and the "client's chair"—yet it always managed to seem crowded. Everything looked cheap, used hard, rubbed off, like Tully himself. The loan shark was a paper-thin man with eyes like rusty razor blades.

"Nice clean file," Tully said, tossing it aside.

"I try to meet my payments on time." Henry thought of all the empty-stomached lunch hours, the cigarette rations, Claire's incredible economies, the children's patched clothes, and he felt a gust of anger. "Just what is it you want, Mr. Tully?"

"The principal," Tully said indifferently.

"The . . ." Henry found himself half standing.

The moneylender leaned back with a swivelly creak that crawled up Henry's spine. "I've run into a little recession, you might call it. You know? Over-extended. So I'm calling my loans in. Sorry."

"But when I took the loan, Mr. Tully, you assured me—"

"Now don't give me that." Tully flicked some papers from the folder, his murderous eyes suddenly intent. "There's a demand clause in these notes, friend. Want to read it over?"

Henry did not try to focus. He knew what the fine print said. But last year he would have signed anything; he had borrowed the limit from legitimate loan companies and Tully had been his last resort.

Tully lit a big cigar. "You've got forty-eight hours to hand me a certified check for $490."

Henry put his finger on the tic. "I haven't got it, Mr. Tully."

"Borrow it."

"I can't. I can't get any more loans. I have a crippled child—the operations, a therapist who comes in every day—"

The moneylender picked up a letter-opener with a sharp point and began to clean his fingernails. "Look, Witter, you got your troubles and I got mine. Be here Thursday night nine o'clock with your check, or I take action."

Henry stumbled out.

Ellery was watching "The Late Show" on TV Thursday night when his doorbell rang. He opened the door and a woman with a worn cloth coat thrown over her housedress fell into his arms. Her eyes were wild.

"Mr. Queen? I'm Claire Witter, Mrs. Henry Witter. I live in the

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neighborhood—left the children with a neighbor—ran all the way. They say you help people in trouble—"

"Get your breath, Mrs. Witter," Ellery said, supporting her. "Just what kind of trouble are you in?"

"My husband's just been picked up by the police. I understand an Inspector Queen is in charge. He's your father, I'm told. But Henry didn't do it, Mr. Queen—"

"What didn't Henry do?"

"Kill that moneylender! They've taken Henry to the office where Tully's body was found. I don't know what to do." And Claire Witter sobbed like a little girl.

"Now, now," Ellery said. "I'll get my hat."

The Inspector had invited Ellery to trail along when the homicide call came in about 10:30, and Ellery had pleaded fatigue; so the old man was surprised when his son showed up nearly two hours later.

"I'm representing Mrs. Witter," Ellery told him. "What's the charge against her husband?"

"Suspicion of murder."

"As pat as all that, Dad?" Ellery glanced around the crowded office. He had left Claire Witter in the hall in the care of a patrolman. "Is that my client?"

A white-faced man with clerical shoulders was leaning against the wall, his eyes shut, and with Sergeant Velie's beef between him and the possibly tempting open window. Nearby huddled a frowsy old lady, a dumpy woman in a smart suit, and an Italian-looking man with a big gray mustache.

Inspector Queen nodded. "The one next to Velie. And don't tell me Witter doesn't look the type."

"He doesn't."

"Just goes to show. It's Witter, all right."

The basket crew were crating the remains of Mr. Tully. Ellery glimpsed the back of a tan jacket splattered with blood.

"I don't see the weapon. Knife?"

"Tully's letter-opener. We couldn't seem to raise a print, so we sent it down to the lab."

Ellery looked around at the bare room, the bare floor. "Those empty desk and file drawers were found open, the way they are now?"

"Nothing's been changed or removed except the letter-opener. By the way, the heat was on Tully for a usury charge and he must have got wind of it. He was getting set to skip. Anyway, here's the rundown. Prouty says Tully was knifed tonight between 8:30 and 9:30—"

The Inspector paused; Mr. Tully was leaving. Ellery hoped Claire Witter would be crying on the patrolman's shoulder when the basket passed her in the hall. There was blood on it.

"Three people entered this office during that hour," the Inspector resumed. "That dumpy woman next to the man with the mustache—her name is Mrs. Lester. Mr. Mustache

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came next—he's a barber named Dominini. Finally, Witter."

"Who's the old lady beside Mrs. Lester?"

"The cleaning woman of the building. She found the body." The Inspector raised his voice. "Mrs. Bogan?"

The old woman shuffled forward on her shapeless shoes. She still had her work-apron on and a dust cloth bound around her lifeless white hair.

"Tell your story again, Mrs. Bogan."

"Couple minutes after ten I comes in here to clean." She had badly fitted false teeth, and her words came bubbling and hissing out like water from a rusty faucet. "What do I see but Mr. Tully laying with his face on the desk and a knife sticking outen his back. There was all blood . . ." Her bleary eyes rolled. But there was nothing on the desk now.

"Did you touch anything, Mrs. Bogan?" Ellery asked.

"Me? I run out yelling me head off. Found a cop in the street and that's all I know, Mister. I'll be seeing that knife sticking outen his back in me dreams."

"You didn't hear anything—a fight, an argument—between half-past eight and half-past nine?"

"I wasn't on this floor then. I was cleaning two floors down."

"Mrs. Lester," Inspector Queen called out.

The dumpy woman in the smart suit blanched under her heavy make-up. She was well into her forties, her hair hennaed to a screaming red, her figure fighting a corset. She kept biting her lips, but Ellery saw under her nervousness the expression of chronic restlessness so often worn by women with too little to do.

"You were one of Tully's victims, too?" he asked her.

"Don't tell my husband," Mrs. Lester said in a rapid-fire falsetto. "He'd kick me out, no kidding. I had to get a loan on the q.t., see, because of—well, a bunch of us girls have a little afternoon poker club. We started out sociable, but I don't know, the limit kept getting higher. . . . The thing is, I went into the hole for a lot of money, mostly to that Mrs. Carson. If my husband Phil knew—he's a nut against gambling . . . Anyway, she says if I don't pay up she'll go to Phil. So I took a $600 loan from this shark Tully."

"And Tully called the loan in, Mrs. Lester?"

The woman's gloved hands began to writhe. "He said I had to pay off the whole thing by half-past eight tonight. Meantime I'd lost more—I swear to God those harpies play with marked cards! So I came here at half-past eight and I hand Tully two hundred dollars—all I could scrape up between what I could sneak off my household money and a ring I hocked that I told Phil I lost. But Tully says nothing doing. So I start begging him to give me more time, and all he does, the

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rat, is sit here emptying desk drawers and throwing away papers and ignoring me like I was dirt!"

"Why was he doing that, Mrs. Lester?"

"How should I know? He takes my money and says either I have the other four hundred for him by tomorrow morning or he goes to my husband. I left him still tearing up papers."

"Alive, of course," Ellery smiled.

"Are you kidding? Say, you don't think—" Her bloated eyes began to look terrified.

"Mr. Dominini," Inspector Queen cut in.

The barber bounded forward in bitter excitement. It took a great many haircuts and shaves to keep his ten children in *pasta* and shoe leather, he exclaimed. He had a small neighborhood shop that could accommodate only so many. The neighborhood had run down, lots of poor people had moved in, Mr. Dominini said, and even with the higher prices barbers had to charge these days things got worse and worse. Finally, he had faced the possible loss of his shop.

"I go to bank, bank say Dominini no good risk no more," the barber shouted, brandishing his clean hairy hands. "What can I do? I go to Tully, the blood suck'!"

For a year he had managed to meet Tully's usurious interest charges. Then, on Tuesday, the loan shark had phoned him and demanded payment in full by Thursday night. He named a quarter to nine as the deadline.

"Where Dominini get fifteen hundred dollar?" the mustachioed barber cried. "I bring him five hundred sixty-five, it's a best I can do. He say, Dominini, that's a no good. I say okay, Mr. Tully, you run barber shop, I work for you. He call me bad name, take my money, say get out, I sue you. Couple hour later, the policeman he pick me up. For what? My wife she cry, *bambini* run under bed . . . I no kill Tully!"

"Then he was alive when you left this office tonight, Mr. Dominini?" Ellery said. "That's your story?"

"It's a true!"

"Clearing Mrs. Lester," Inspector Queen murmured.

Ellery frowned. "What was Tully doing, if anything," he asked the barber, "while you were here?"

"Like a that lady say. He take a things out of file cabinet. Tear up paper, folder."

"Bringing us," the Inspector said, "to Henry Witter."

Sergeant Velie had to assist Henry forward. The bookkeeper sank into the chair, his tic working overtime. Suddenly his nostrils expanded. He looked up. Ellery was lighting a cigarette.

"Might I have one?" Henry asked. "I've run out."

"Sure. No, that's all right. Keep the pack."

"Oh, no—"

"I have another, Mr. Witter."

"Thanks. Thanks a million."

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Henry inhaled hungrily. "I should have cut them out long ago." He puffed and puffed.

"Mr. Witter, you found Tully alive at nine?"

"Oh, yes," Henry said.

"Alive and alone?"

Henry nodded.

"Clearing Dominini," the Inspector murmured. "Neat?"

"Even gaudy," Ellery murmured back. "Tell me just what happened, Mr. Witter, after you got here."

Henry lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the old one, looked around, hesitated, then tossed the smoldering butt into the wastebasket.

"I told Tully I hadn't been able to raise the money. I said, you can do what you want, Mr. Tully, sue me, have me arrested, beaten up, killed, it won't do you any good, you can't get blood from a stone. He kept sitting there behind the desk tearing up papers and records as if he didn't hear me. But he was paying attention, all right." Henry gulped in a lungful of smoke. "Because as soon as I got through he started to chew me out. What he called me—"

Henry choked over the smoke. After a moment Ellery said, "Yes, Mr. Witter?"

"I never raised my hand in anger to anybody in my life. But Tully said some things to me no man could take. Real nasty things. And while he was saying them I kept getting sorer and sorer." Henry's tic was hopping around now like a flea. "I thought of all the months we'd scrimped to pay him his blood money and at the same time pay for the medical care my little girl Jody needs so maybe some day she'll walk again. I thought of the stockings my wife couldn't buy, the baseball cards my Eddie couldn't collect, the complaints we didn't make to the Health Department about the cockroaches because the landlord might get mad and somehow chisel us out of the apartment and we'd have to rent another place at a bigger rent . . . I thought of a lot of things like that, and then I leaned over the desk and let Tully have it."

"With the paper-knife?" Ellery asked gently.

"Huh?" Henry Witter came back to the present. "No, with this." Henry made a skinny fist and looked at it. "I pasted him one right on the button. Socko!" The memory of it gave him a momentary pleasure; a spark of life came into his eyes. "I didn't know I could hit that hard. He went out like a light."

"How did he fall, Mr. Witter?"

"On his face on the desk. I certainly was surprised. But I felt better, too. So then I walked out."

"Leaving Tully unconscious but alive?"

"Sure. He was breathing like a walrus."

"Did you notice anyone in the hall, or downstairs?"

"Just the night man mopping in the lobby."

"And that's how we know," Inspector Queen said to his son, "that

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nobody else entered the building between Witter's leaving and Mrs. Bogan's finding the body. The porter saw Witter come and go, and he was in the lobby working the whole time afterward. Yes, Velie?"

The Sergeant, who had been summoned into the hall, came back to rumble into the Inspector's ear.

"That cinches it," the Inspector snapped. "The lab's found three partially smeared prints on Tully's letter-knife. One is Tully's. The other two have been identified, Witter, as yours."

Henry Witter sat there with his mouth open. But then he yelped as the cigarette burned his fingers. He flung it into the wastebasket and covered his face with his hands. Ellery, fearing a fire, walked over to the basket, but he saw that it was empty except for the two butts.

"So, Witter," Inspector Queen began.

"Hold it, Dad." Ellery stooped over Henry. "Mr. Witter, while you were seated here across the desk from Tully, did you happen to handle the letter-knife?"

Henry looked up dully. "I must have, if my fingerprints are on it. I don't remember. But I didn't use it on Tully. I'd remember that. God, yes. Don't you believe me, Inspector?"

"No," Inspector Queen said. "No, Witter, I don't. Take my advice and come clean. Maybe the D.A. would consent to a lesser plea—"

"Maybe the D.A. would, but I won't," Ellery said. "My client will plead not guilty."

Sergeant Velie remarked with some bitterness to no one in particular, "And the beauty of it is, he does it all with his little sleeves rolled up."

The Inspector's glance at the Sergeant was a terrible thing. "How come, Ellery?"

"Because they aren't here," Ellery said, waving vaguely.

"Because *what* aren't here?"

"The papers."

"*What* papers?"

"Look," Ellery said. "Mrs. Lester, Dominini, Witter—all three say Tully was cleaning out his desk and file, throwing away papers and records. You told me, Dad, that nothing has been removed from this office except Tully's letter-knife. Yet the file and desk drawers are cleaned out, the floor is bare, there's nothing on the desk—*and the wastebasket is empty*. I ask you: Where are all the papers and records Tully was throwing out?"

His father looked as if he had been struck by lightning. He turned toward the old cleaning woman cowering in her corner, but Ellery was there before him. "You'd been inside this office earlier tonight than you claimed, Mrs. Bogan," Ellery was saying "—right after Witter left, in fact. And you found Tully just recovering from Witter's haymaker."

The old woman blinked.

"You owed Tully money, too, didn't you, Mrs. Bogan? And he

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put the screws on you tonight as well, while you were cleaning his office—right? You'd already emptied the wastebasket and taken the contents outside when you killed him. By the way, how did you come to owe Tully money?"

The old woman blinked and blinked. Finally she touched her liverish old lips with her old tongue, and she said, "Me boy Jim. Jim's a three-times loser. Next time he gets sent up, it's for life. And then what's he do but hook a wad outen the till in the garage where he's working. The boss says he won't send Jimmy up if I pays back the money, so I borries it offen Tully . . . I paid him his interest faithful.

"But tonight Tully says he wants all the money or he'll have me pinched. I didn't care about meself, I've had it, but if I wasn't around to keep an eye on Jim . . . I had me cleaning gloves on . . . I sees the knife on Tully's desk . . . I was in back of him . . ." Her old face settled, but it was hard to tell whether the lines told of remorse, resignation, or indifference. But then she said, "Now who'll be keeping me Jimmy out of trouble?"

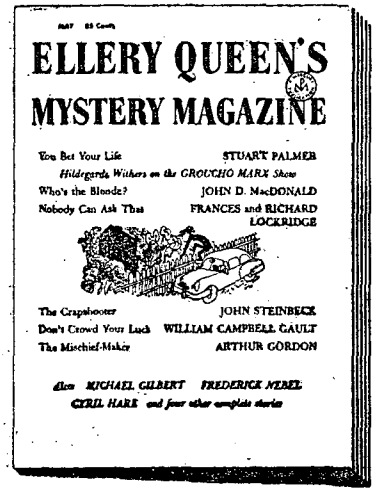
Inspector Queen said furiously, "Maybe you, Mother, maybe you. Just tell that story of yours to a jury."

When they had taken the old lady out, Ellery nudged Henry Witter, whose mouth was open. "You still here? Don't you know there's a lady waiting for you in the hall?"

"Claire." Henry hauled himself out of the chair.

"Oh, and you might remember," Ellery said severely, "—I'm thinking of your little girl, Mr. Witter—that miracles do happen."

Henry shook himself like a dog coming out of a mud hole. "You bet, Mr. Queen," he said. "Thanks for reminding me."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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS**

TITLE: ***A Matter of Public Notice***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Captain Edward Fox

LOCALE: Rockland, Minnesota

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Three women who had left their husbands—one ran a nursery school, one wrote advertising copy, one operated a beauty parlor. Three lonely women—and all three strangled within a few weeks! It was Captain Fox's case—and his wife had also left him . . .*

". . . the victim, Mrs. Mary Philips, was the estranged wife of Clement Philips of this city who is now being sought by the police for questioning . . ."

NANCY FOX REREAD THE SENTENCE. It was from the Rockland, Minnesota *Gazette,* reporting the latest of three murders to occur in the city within a month. "Estranged wife" was the phrase that gave her pause. Common newspaper parlance it might be, but for her it held a special meaning: for all its commonplaceness, it most often signals the tragic story of a woman suddenly alone—a story that she, Nancy Fox, could tell. Oh, how very well she could tell it!—being now an estranged wife herself.

How, she wondered, had Mary Philips taken her estrangement from a husband she probably once adored? Did he drink? Gamble? Was he unfaithful? Reason enough—any one of them—for some women. Or was it a cruelty surprised in him that had started the falling away of love, piece by piece, like the petals from a wasting flower?

Had the making of the final decision consumed Mary Philips's ev-

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ery thought for months and had the moment of telling it been too terrible to remember? And did it recur, fragmenting the peace it was supposed to have brought? Did the sudden aloneness leave her with the feeling that part of her was missing, that she might never again be a whole person?

Idle questions, surely, to ask now of Mrs. Philips. Mary Philips, age 39, occupation beauty operator, was dead—strangled at the rear of her shop with an electric cord at the hands of an unknown assailant. And Clement Philips was being sought by the police—in point of fact, by Captain Edward Allan Fox of the Rockland force, which was why Nancy Fox had read the story so interestedly in the first place.

Clement Philips was sought, found, and dismissed, having been two thousand miles from Rockland at the time of Mary Philips's murder. Several others, picked up after each of the three murders, were also dismissed. It was only natural that these suspects were getting testy, talking about their rights.

The Chief of Police was getting testy also. His was a long history of political survival in Rockland. Only in recent years had his work appeared worthy of public confidence, and that was due to the addition, since the war, of Captain Fox to the force. Fox knew it. No one knew his own worth better than "The Fox" did. And he knew how many years past retirement the old chief had stretched his tenure.

The chief paced back and forth before Captain Fox's desk, grinding one hand into the other behind his back. "I never thought the day would come when we'd turn up such a maniac in this town! He doesn't belong here, Fox!"

"Ah, but he does—by right of conquest," Fox said with the quiet sort of provocation he knew grated on the old man.

The chief whirled on him. "You never had such a good time in your life, did you?"

Fox sighed. He was accustomed to the bombast, the show of wrath that made his superior seem almost a caricature. He did not have to take it: the last of the chief's whipping boys was custodian now of the city morgue. "Once or twice before, sir," Fox said, his eyes unwavering before the chief's.

The old man gave ground. He knew who was running the force, and he was not discontented. He had correctly estimated Fox's ambition: what Fox had of power, he had only with the old man's sanction. "In this morning's brief for me and the mayor, you made quite a thing of the fact that all three victims were separated from their husbands. Now I'm not very deep in this psychology business—and the missus and I haven't ever been separated more than the weekend it took to bury her sister—so you're going to have to explain what you meant.

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Does this separation from their husbands make 'em more—ah—attractive? Is that what you're getting at? More willing?"

Fox could feel a sudden pulse-throb at his temple. It was a lecher's picture the old man had conjured with his words and gestures, and his reference to Fox's own vulnerability—Nancy having left him—stirred him to a fury a weaker man would not have been able to control.

But he managed it, saying, "Only more available—and therefore more susceptible to the advances of their assailant."

The old man pulled at the loose skin of his throat. "It's interesting, Fox, how you go at it from the woman's point of view. The mayor says it makes damn good reading."

"Thank you, sir," Fox said for something that obviously was not intended as a compliment. "Do you remember Thomas Coyne?"

"Thomas Coyne," the chief repeated.

"The carpenter—the friend of Elsie Troy's husband," Fox prompted. Elsie Troy had been the first of the three victims. "We've picked him up again. No better alibi this time than last—this time, his landlady. I think he's too damned smug to have the conscience most men live with, so I've set a little trap for him. I thought maybe you'd like to be there."

"Think you can make a case against him?"

Fox rose and took the reports from where the old man had put them. "Chief," he said then, "there are perhaps a half dozen men in Rockland against whom a case could be made . . . including myself."

The old man's jaw sagged. A lot of other people were also unsure of Ed Fox—of the working mechanism they suspected ran him instead of a heart. "Let's see this Coyne fellow," the chief said. "I don't have much taste for humor at a time like this."

"I was only pointing up, sir, that our killer's mania is not apparent to either friends or victims—until it is too late."

The old man grunted and thrust his bent shoulders as far back as they would go—in subconscious imitation of The Fox's military bearing. On the way to the "Sun Room"—so called because of the brilliance of its lighting—where Thomas Coyne was waiting, the chief paused and asked, "Is it safe to say for sure now that Elsie Troy was the first victim? That we don't have a transient killer with Rockland just one stop on his itinerary?"

There had been several indications of such a possibility.

"I think we may assume that Elsie Troy was the beginning," Fox said. "I think now that her murder was a random business, unpremeditated. She was killed at night—in her bedroom, with the lights on and the window shades up. She was fully dressed, unmolested. It wasn't a set-up for murder. It was pure luck

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that someone didn't see it happening.

"But having walked out of Elsie Troy's house a free man, her assailant got a new sense of power—a thrill he'd never had in his life. And then there began in him what amounted to a craving for murder. How he chooses victims, I don't know. That's why I called attention to the . . . the state of suspension in the marriages of the victims." Fox shrugged. "At least, that's my reconstruction of the pattern."

"You make it sound like you were there," the old man said.

"Yes," Fox said, "I suppose I do." He watched the old man bull his neck and plow down the hall ahead of him, contemplating the bit of sadism in himself—in, he suspected, all policemen. It was their devil, as was avarice the plague of merchants, conceit the foe of actors, complacency the doctor's demon, pride the clergyman's. He believed firmly that man's worst enemy was within himself. His own, Fox thought grimly, had cost him a wife, and beyond that, God Almighty knew what else. There were times since Nancy's going when he felt the very structure of his being tremble. There was no joy without ner, only the sometimes bitter pleasure of enduring pain.

Coyne sat in the bright light, as Fox had expected, with the serenity of a religious mendicant. His arms folded, he could wait out eternity by his manner. It was unnatural behavior for any man under police inquisition. Fox was himself very casual. "Well, Tom, it's about time for us to start all over again. You know the chief?"

Coyne made a gesture of recognition. The chief merely glared down at him, his face a wrinkled mask of distaste.

"April twenty-ninth," Fox led. "That was the night you decided finally that you had time to fix Mrs. Troy's back steps."

"Afternoon," Coyne corrected. "I was home at night."

"What do you call the dividing line between afternoon and night?"

"Dark—at night it gets dark . . . sir."

"And you want it understood that you were home *before* dark?"

"I was home before dark," Coyne said calmly.

There had never been reference in the newspaper to the hour of Elsie Troy's death, partly because the medical examiner could put it no closer than between seven and nine. The month being April, darkness fell by seven.

"Suppose you tell the chief just what happened while you were there."

"Nothing happened. I went there on my way home from work. I fixed the steps. Then I called in to her that the job was done. She came out and said, 'That's fine, Tom. I'll pay you next week.' I never did get paid, but I guess that don't matter now."

Told by melancholy rote, Fox

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thought, having heard even the philosophic ending before. But then, most people repeated themselves under normal circumstances, especially about grievances they never expected to be righted.

"What I can't understand, Tom, is why you decided to fix the steps that day, and not, say, the week before?"

Coyne shrugged. "I just had the time then, I guess."

"She hadn't called you?"

"No, sir," he said with emphasis.

"You say that as though she would not have called you under any circumstances."

Coyne merely shrugged again.

"As a matter of fact, it was the husband—when they were still together—who asked you to repair the steps, wasn't it, Tom?"

"I guess it was."

"And you happened to remember it on the day she was about to be murdered."

"I didn't plan it that way," Coyne said, the words insolent, but his manner still serene. He tilted his chair back.

"It's a funny thing, Chief," Fox said. "Here's a man commissioned to do a job on a friend's house. He doesn't get around to it until the home has broken up. If it was me, I'd have forgotten all about the job under those circumstances—never done it at all."

"So would I," the chief said, "unless I was looking for an excuse to go there."

"Exactly," Fox said, still in a casual voice.

"It wouldn't be on account of you they broke up, would it, Coyne?" the chief suggested.

Coyne seemed to suppress a laugh. It was the first time his effort at control showed. "No, sir."

"Don't you like women?" the chief snapped.

"I'm living with one now," Coyne said.

"Mrs. Tuttle?" said Fox, naming Coyne's landlady.

"What's wrong with that? She's a widow."

Fox did not say what was wrong with it. But Mr. Thomas Coyne was not going to have it both ways: he had alibied himself with Mrs. Tuttle for the hours of all three murders. A paramour was not the most believable of witnesses. But then, from what Fox had seen of Mrs. Tuttle, he would not have called her the most believable of paramours, either.

With deliberate ease Fox then led Coyne through an account of his activities on the nights of the two subsequent murders. By the suspect's telling they brought Coyne nowhere near the scenes.

Finally Fox exchanged glances with the old man. He had had more than enough of Coyne by now and very little confidence that the carpenter had been worth bringing in again. "You can go now, Tom," Fox said, "but don't leave town." He nodded at the uniformed policeman by the door. And then, after

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a pause, "By the way, Tom, when was the last time you went swimming?"

"Oh, two or three weeks ago."

"Where?"

"Baker's Beach," Coyne said, naming the public park.

Fox nodded, held the door for the chief, and then closed it behind them.

"That guy should go on the radio," the old man said. "He knows all the answers."

"Seems like it," Fox said.

The second victim, Jane Mullins, had been strangled on the beach. But if Tom Coyne, as he said, had gone swimming two or three weeks ago, that would account for the sand found in Coyne's room.

Sand and a stack of newspapers—the only clues to Thomas Coyne's interests . . . and a clue also to the personality of his landlady; Mrs. Tuttle was a very careless housekeeper to leave sand and old newspapers lying around for weeks. She might be as careless with time—even with the truth.

Three strangulations—all of women who lived alone—within a month. It was enough to set the whole of a city the size of Rockland—population 110,000—on edge. As the *Gazette* editorialized: "When murder can match statistics with traffic deaths, it is time to investigate the investigators."

Knowing Ed Fox so well, Nancy wondered if he had not planted that line with the *Gazette;* it had The Fox's bite. It would be like him, if he was not getting all the cooperation he wanted from his superiors.

She looked at the clock and poured herself another cup of coffee. She was due at the radio station at eleven. Her broadcast time was noon: "The Woman's Way."

How cynical she had become about him, and through him about so many things. As much as anything, that cynicism had enabled her to make the break: the realization that she was turning into a bitter woman with a slant on the world that made her see first the propensity for evil in a man, and only incidentally his struggle against it. This philosophy might make Ed a good policeman, but it made her a poor educator. And she considered herself an educator despite his belittlement of her work. A radio commentator was responsible to her audience that they learn a little truth from her. Why just a little? Ed had always said to that.

She wondered if Ed thought about her at all these days, when she could scarcely think of anything except him. It was as though she bore his heelmark on her soul. A cruel image—oh, she had them. For a month she had lived apart from him, yet the morbid trauma of their life together still hung about her. If she could not banish the memories, she must find psychiatric help. That would greatly amuse Ed—one more useless occupation by his reckoning.

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Worse than useless, the enemy of justice: his hardest catch could escape the punishment that fit his crime by a psychiatrist's testimony.

Nancy folded the morning paper and rinsed her coffee cup.

Strange, the occupations of the three victims: Mary Philips had operated a beauty parlor, Elsie Troy had run a nursery school. She could hear Ed lecture on that: why have children if you pushed them out of the house in rompers? And poor Jane Mullins had written advertising copy—to Ed, perhaps the most useless nonsense of all. Well, that would give Ed something in common with the murderer—contempt for his victims. Ed always liked to have a little sympathy for the murderer: it made him easier to find. And no man ever suffered such anguish of soul as did Ed Fox at the hour of his man's execution.

There, surely, was the worst moment in all her five years of marriage to him: the night Mort Simmons was executed. Simmons had shot a man and Ed had made the arrest and got the confession. Nancy had known her husband was suffering, and she had ventured to console him with some not very original remarks about his having only done his duty, and that doubts were perfectly natural at such an hour.

"Doubts!" he had screamed at her. "I have no more doubt about his guilt than the devil waiting for him at the gates of hell!"

She had thought a long time about that. Slowly then the realization had come to her that Ed Fox suffered when such a man died because, in the pursuit and capture of him, Ed identified himself with the criminal. And fast upon that realization the thought had taken hold of her that never in their marriage had she been that close to him.

Nancy opened her hand and saw the marks of her nails in the palm. She looked at the nails. They needed polish. A beauty operator, Mary Philips. If Nancy had been in the habit of having her hair done by a professional, she might possibly have known Mrs. Philips. The shop was in the neighborhood where she and Ed had lived, where Ed still lived . . .

She caught up her purse and brief case and forced her thoughts onto a recipe for which she had no appetite. Ed was not troubled that way in his work . . .

"Damn it, Fox, give them something! They're riding my back like a cartload of monkeys." This was the old man's complaint on the third day after Mary Philips's murder. Reporters were coming into Rockland from all over the country. The mayor had turned over the facilities of his own office to them.

So Captain Fox sat down and composed a description of a man who might have been the slayer. He did it aware of his cynicism.

The state police laboratory had been unable to bring out any really

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pertinent physical evidence in any of the cases. The murderer was a wily one—a maniac or a genius . . . except in the instance of Elsie Troy. Fox could not help but dwell on that random start to so successful a career.

The detective stood over the stenographer while she typed the description—twenty copies on the electric machine. He then dictated a few lines calculated to counteract the description, to placate the rising hysteria of all the lonely women in Rockland. So many lonely women, whether or not they lived alone . . . Did Nancy feel alarmed? he wondered. If she did, she had not called on him for reassurance. But then she would not. There was that streak of stubborn pride in her that made her run like a wounded animal from the hand most willing to help.

"Forty-eight complaints have already been investigated, twenty-one suspects questioned . . ." Give them statistics, Fox thought. Nowadays they mean more to people than words. Maybe figures didn't lie, but they made a convincing camouflage for the truth.

He handed out the release over the chief of police's name, and found himself free once more to do the proper work of a detective, something unrelated to public relations. Suspect Number 22 had been waiting for over an hour in the Sun Room.

It gave Fox a degree of satisfaction to know that he was there—"Deacon" Alvin Rugg. Rugg with two g's. G as in God, he thought. The young man was a religious fanatic—either a fanatic or a charlatan, possibly both, in Fox's mind. And he was The Fox's own special catch, having been flushed out in the policeman's persistent search for something the three women might have had in common besides the shedding of their husbands. All three—Elsie Troy, Jane Mullins, and Mary Philips—were interested in a revivalist sect called "Church of the Morning."

On his way to the Sun Room, Fox changed his mind about tackling the suspect there. Why not treat him as if he were only a witness?—the better to disarm him. He had no police record, young Mr. Rugg, except for a violation of the peace ordinance in a nearby town: the complaint had been filed against his father and himself—their zeal had simply begat too large a crowd.

Fox had the young man brought to the office, and there he offered him the most comfortable chair in the room. Rugg chose a straight one instead. Fox thought he might prove rugged, Rugg.

The lithe youth wore his hair crested around his head a little like a brushed-up halo, for it was almost the color of gold. His eyes were large, blue, and vacuous, though no doubt some would call them deep.

"Church of the Morning," Fox started, trying without much success

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to keep the cynicism from his voice. "When did you join up?"

"I was called at birth," Alvin replied with a rotish piety.

He was older than he looked, Fox realized, and a sure phony. "How old are you, Rugg?"

"Twenty."

"Let's see your draft registration. This is no newspaper interview."

"Thirty-two," Rugg amended, wistful as a woman.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Odd jobs. I'm a handyman when I'm not doing the Lord's work."

"How do you get these . . . these odd jobs?"

"My father recommends me."

"That would be the Reverend Rugg?"

The young man nodded—there was scarcely the shadow of a beard on his face. Fox was trying to calculate how the women to whom his father recommended him would feel about Alvin of the halo. Fox himself would have had more feeling for a goldfish, but then he was not a lonely woman. He must look up some of them, those still among the living. Fox had gone to the revival tent the night before—he and one-tenth the population of Rockland, almost 12,000 people. It did not seem so extraordinary then that all three victims had chanced to catch the fervor of the Church of the Morning.

"I suppose you talk religion with your employers?"

"That is why I am for hire, Captain."

The arrogance of an angel on its way to hell, Fox thought. "Who was your mother?" he snapped, on the chance that this was the young man's point of vulnerability.

"A Magdalen," Rugg said. "I have never asked further. My father is a holy man."

Fox muttered a vulgarity beneath his breath. He was a believer in orthodoxy, himself. Revivalists were not for him, especially one like Reverend Rugg whom he had heard last night speak of this boy, this golden lad, as sent to him like a pure spirit, a reward—this golden lad . . . of thirty-two.

"The reason I asked you to come in, Alvin," Fox said, forcing amiability upon himself, and quite as though he had not sent two officers to pick Rugg up, "I thought you might be able to help us on these murders. You've heard about them?"

"I . . . I had thought of coming in myself," Rugg said.

"When did that thought occur to you?"

"Well, two or three weeks ago at least—the first time, I mean. You see, I worked for that Mrs. Troy—cleaned her windows, things like that. Her husband was a bitter, vengeful man. He doesn't have the spiritual consolation his wife had."

A nice distinction of the present and past tenses, Fox thought. But what Troy did have was an unbreakable alibi: five witnesses to his continuous presence at a poker table on the night Elsie Troy was slain.

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"She told you that about him?" Fox prompted cheerfully.

"Well, not exactly. She wanted to make a donation to the church but she couldn't. He had their bank account tied up . . . she said."

The hesitation before the last two words was marked by Fox. Either the Ruggs had investigated Elsie Troy's finances, he thought, or Alvin was covering up an intimacy he feared the detective suspected or had evidence of.

"But Mrs. Troy ran a nursery school," Fox said blandly. "I don't suppose she took the little ones in out of charity, do you?"

"Her husband had put up the money for the school. He insisted his investment should be paid back to him first."

"I wouldn't call that unreasonable, would you, Alvin? A trifle unchivalrous, perhaps, but not unreasonable?"

A vivid dislike came into the boy's, the man's, eyes. He had suddenly made an enemy of him, Fox thought with grim satisfaction. He would soon provoke the unguarded word. "Didn't you and Mrs. Troy talk about anything besides money?"

"We talked about faith," Rugg said, and then clamped his lips tight.

"Did you also do chores for Mrs. Mullins?"

"No. But she offered once to get me a messenger's job at the advertising company where she worked. Said I could do a lot of good there."

"I'll bet," Fox said. "And how about Mary Philips? What was she going to do for you?" He resisted the temptation to refer to the beauty shop.

"Nothing. She was a very nice woman."

That, Fox thought, was a revelatory answer. It had peace of soul in it. The captain then proceeded to turn the heat on "Deacon" Rugg, and before half an hour was over he got from the golden boy the admission that both Elsie Troy and Jane Mullins had made amatory advances. Seeking more than religion, the self-widowed starvelings! They kicked out husbands and then welcomed any quack in trousers. Lady breadwinners! Fox could feel the explosion of his own anger; it spiced his powers of inquisition.

Alvin Rugg was then given such mental punishment as might have made a less vulnerable sinner threaten suit against the city. But while "The Deacon" lacked airtight alibis for the nights of the 29th of April, the 16th of May, and June 2nd, he had been seen about his father's tent by many people, and he maintained his innocence through sweat and tears, finally sobbing his protestations on his knees.

The extent of The Fox's mercy was to leave Rugg alone to compose himself and find his own way to the street.

"Until tomorrow then, this is Nancy Fox going 'The Woman's Way.'"

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Nancy gathered her papers so as not to make a sound the microphone could pick up. The newscaster took over. The next instant Nancy was listening with all the concentration of her being.

". . . a man about forty, quick of movement, near six feet tall, a hundred and sixty pounds, extremely agile; he probably dresses conservatively and speaks softly. One of his victims is thought to have been describing him when she told a friend, 'You never know when he is going to smile or when he isn't—he changes moods so quickly . . .'"

Nancy pressed her lips together and leaned far away from the table. Her breathing was loud enough to carry into the mike. That was her own husband the newscaster was describing—Ed Fox himself right down to the unpredictable smile! Actually, it could be any of a dozen men, she tried to tell herself. Of course. Any of a hundred! What nonsense to put such a description over the air!

She had regained her composure by the time the reporter had finished his newscast. Then she had coffee with him, as she often did. But what a fantastic experience! Fantasy—that was the only word for it. The description had been part of a release from the office of the chief of police, which meant it had Ed's own approval.

"But now I'm going to tell you what it sounded like to me," the newsman said. "Like somebody—maybe on the inside—deliberately muddying up the tracks. I tell you somebody down there knows more than we're getting in these handouts."

"What a strange idea!" Nancy cried, and gave a deprecating laugh as hollow as the clink of her dime on the counter.

She spent the next couple of hours in the municipal library, trying to learn something about water rights. A bill on the water supply was before the city council. Two years of research would have been more adequate to the subject, she discovered. Once more she had dived into something only to crack her head in the shallows of her own ignorance. Then she drove out to the county fairgrounds to judge the cake contest of the Grange women. She fled the conversational suggestion that the murderer might be scouting there. Some women squealed with a sort of ecstatic terror.

A feeling of deepening urgency pursued her from one chore to the next: there was something she ought to do, something she must return to and attend to. And yet the specific identity of this duty did not reveal itself. Sometimes she seemed on the brink of comprehension . . . but she escaped. Oh, yes, that much of herself she knew: she was fleeing it, not it fleeing her.

With that admission she cornered herself beyond flight. There was a question hanging in the dark reaches of her mind, unasked now even as

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it was five years ago. Since the night Mort Simmons died in the electric chair, it clung like monstrous fungi at the end of every cavern through which she fled. And by leaving her husband's house she had not escaped it.

Ask it now, she demanded—ask it now!

She drove off the pavement and braked the car to a shrieking halt. "All right!" she cried aloud. "I ask it before God—is Ed Fox capable of . . ." But she could not finish the sentence. She bent her head over the wheel and sobbed, "Eddie, oh, Eddie dear, forgive me . . ."

Without food, without rest, she drove herself until the day was spent, and with it most of her energy. Only her nerves remained taut. She returned just before dark to the apartment she had subleased from a friend. It was in no way her home: she had changed nothing in it, not even the leaf on the calendar. And so the place gave her no message when she entered—neither warning nor welcome.

She left the hall door ajar while she groped her way to the table where the lamp stood, and at the moment of switching on the light she sensed that someone had followed her into the apartment. Before she could fully see him, he caught her into his arms.

"Don't, please don't!" she cried. Her struggling but made him tighten his grip.

"For God's sake, Nancy, it's me!"

"I know!" she said, and leaped away as Ed gave up his grasp of her. She could taste the retch of fear. She whirled and looked at him as if she were measuring the distance between them.

"You knew?" he said incredulously. "You knew that it was me and yet you acted like that?"

She could only stare at him and nod in giddy acknowledgment of the truth.

His hands fell limp to his sides. "My God," he murmured.

A world of revelation opened to her in that mute gesture, in the simple dropping of his hands.

Neither of them moved. She felt the ache that comes with unshed tears gathering in her throat as the bitter taste of fear now ran out. It was a long moment until the tears were loosed and welled into her eyes, a moment in which they measured each other in the other's understanding—or in the other's misunderstanding.

"I thought I might surprise an old love—if I surprised you," he said flatly. "And then when I realized you were afraid, it seemed so crazy—so inconsiderate a thing to do, with a maniac abroad." He stood, self-pilloried and miserable—immobile, lest one move of his start up the fear in her again.

At last she managed the words: "Eddie, I do love you."

Fox raised his arms and held them out to her and she ran to him with utter abandon.

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Presently he asked, "How long have you been afraid of me?"

"I think since the night Mort Simmons was executed," she said, and then clinging to him again, "Oh, my dear, my beloved husband."

He nodded and lifted her fingers to his lips. "How did you conceal it? Fear kills love. They say like that." He snapped his fingers.

"I never called it fear," she said, lifting her chin—and that, she thought, that inward courage was what he mistook for pride—"not until . . ." She bit her lip against the confession of the final truth.

"Until the murder of one, two, three women," Fox said evenly, "with whose lives you knew I'd have no sympathy."

"I didn't know that exactly," she said. "I only knew your prejudices."

"Pride and Prejudice," he mused. He pushed her gently an arm's distance from him. "Take another look at my prejudices, Nancy, and see who suffers most by them."

"May I come home now, Eddie?"

"Soon, darling. Very soon." He picked up his hat from where it had fallen in their struggle. "But you must let me tell you when."

He should have known it, really, Fox thought, closing the apartment door behind him. He was so alert to it in others, he should have seen the fear grow in her since the night she caught him naked-souled, suffering the death of Mort Simmons. Suppose that night he had tried to explain what had happened to him? How could he have said that it was not Mort Simmons's guilt he doubted, but his own innocence? How tell her that at the hour of his death, Mort Simmons was in a very special way the victim of Ed Fox?

Fox drove to within a block of Thomas Coyne's boarding house. He parked the car and walked up the street to where the tail he had put on Coyne was sitting, a newspaper before him, in a nondescript Ford. Fox slipped in beside him.

"Coyne's in there," the other detective said. "Been there since he came home from work. Ten minutes ago he went down to the corner for a paper. Came right back."

Fox decided to talk first with Mrs. Tuttle. He approached her by way of the kitchen door, identified himself, and got a cup of warmed-over coffee at the table. A voluble, lusty, good-natured woman, she responded easily to his question—whether she was interested in the Church of the Morning. She shook her head. Fox described "Deacon" Alvin Rugg and his relationship to the murdered women.

Mrs. Tuttle clucked disapproval and admitted she had heard of him, but where she could not remember. To the captain's direct question as to whether she had ever seen the golden boy, she shook her head again. "I tell you, Mr. Fox, I like my men and my whiskey 100 proof, and my religion in a church with a stone foundation."

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Fox laughed. "Anybody in the house here interested in the Revival?"

"What you want to know," she said, looking at him sidewise, "is if it was Tom Coyne who told me about him. Isn't that it?"

Fox admitted to the bush he had been beating around. "I'd like to know if Coyne has shown any interest in the sect."

"I don't know for sure. He takes sudden fancies, that one does."

"I understand he has a very deep fancy for you," Fox said bluntly.

Mrs. Tuttle frowned, the good nature fleeing her face. She took his cup and saucer to the sink and clattered it into the dish basin.

"I'm sorry to be clumsy about a delicate matter," Fox said, getting up from the table and following to where he could see her face. Shame or wrath? he wondered. Perhaps both. "It was very necessary to Coyne that he confide that information to the police," he elaborated, in subtle quest of further information.

"Was it?" she said. "Then maybe it was necessary for him to come to me in the first place. Can you tell me that, mister?"

"If you tell me when it was he first came to you—in that sense, I mean," Fox said.

"A couple of nights ago," she said. "Till then it was just . . . well, we were pals, that's all."

Fox examined his own fingernails. "He didn't take very long to tell about it, did he?"

"Now answer my question to you," she said. "Did he come just so he could tell you him and me were—like that?"

Fox ventured to lay his hand on her arm. She pulled away from his touch as though it were fire. Her shame was deep, her affair shallow, he thought. "Just stay in the kitchen," he said. She would have her answer soon enough.

He moved through the hall and alerted the detective on watch at the front. Then he went upstairs. Thomas Coyne was sitting in his room, the newspaper open on the table before him, a pencil in his hand. He had been caught in the obviously pleasurable act of marking an item in the paper, and he gathered himself up on seeing Fox—like a bather surprised in the nude.

It gave an ironic sequence to the pretense on which Fox had come. "I wanted to see your swim trunks," Captain Fox said.

Coyne was still gaping. Slowly he uncoiled himself, and then pointed to the dresser drawer.

"You get them," Fox said. "I don't like to invade your privacy." He turned partially away, in fact, to suggest that he was unaware of the newspaper over which he had surprised the man. He waited until Coyne reached the dresser, and then moved toward the table, but even there Fox pointed to the picture on the wall beyond it, and remarked that he remembered its like from his school days. A similar print, he said,

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had hung in the study hall. On and on he talked, and if Coyne was aware of the detective's quick scrutiny of his marked newspaper, it was less fearful for the man to pretend he had not seen it.

"My wife, Ellen, having left my bed and board, I am no longer responsible . . ."

Fox had seen it. So, likely, had the husbands of Mary Philips and Jane Mullins and Elsie Troy given public notice sometime or other. The decision he needed to reach instantly was whether he had sufficient evidence to indict Tom Coyne: it was so tempting to let him now pursue the pattern once more—up to its dire culmination.

The detective stood, his arms folded, while Coyne brought the swim trunks. "Here you are, Captain," he said.

"Haven't worn them much," Fox said, not touching them.

"It's early," Coyne said.

"So it is," Fox said, "the fifth of June. Baker's Beach just opened Memorial Day, didn't it?"

There was no serenity in Coyne now. He realized the trap into which he had betrayed himself while under questioning by Fox and the chief of police. So many things he had made seem right—even an affair with Mrs. Tuttle; and now that one little thing, by Fox's prompting, was wrong. He would not have been allowed in the waters of Baker's Beach before the thirtieth of May. In order to account for the sand in his room following the murder of Jane Mullins, he had said he had gone swimming at Baker's Beach two or three weeks before.

Before midnight Coyne confessed to the three homicides, the last two premeditated. He had not intended to kill Elsie Troy. But he had been watching her behavior with young Alvin Rugg, and as her husband's friend he had taken the excuse of fixing her steps to gain her company and reproach her. She had called him "a nasty little man," and where matters had gone from that, he said, he could not clearly remember . . . except that he killed her. He was sure because of the wonderful exhilaration it gave him after he had done it—so wonderful it had to be repeated.

The chief had pride in his eyes, commending Captain Fox for so fine a job. They went upstairs together to see the mayor, and there the chief took major credit as his due. He announced, however, that this would be his last case before retirement, and he put his arm about Captain Fox as the reporters were invited in. Fox asked to be excused.

"Damn it, man, you've got to do the talking," the chief protested.

"Yes, sir, if you say so," Fox said. "But first I want to call my wife."

"By all means," the chief said. "Here, use the mayor's phone."

Nancy answered at the first ring.

"Will you pick me up tonight, my dear, on your way home?" Fox said.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MANLY WADE WELLMAN**

TITLE: ***The Mayor Calls His Family***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

LOCALE: Live Oak, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The mayor had good reason to be proud of his family. Each one—wife, daughter, son—knew how to deal with a blackmailer. A story of the deep South, with deep meaning.*

MOST PEOPLE IN LIVE OAK WERE in bed asleep by ten thirty last night. Up in the sky swooped a lanky little scrap of moon, like a sickle about to reap a field it had no business reaping. Its light barely showed the finest house in Live Oak, Mayor Jess Cobb's two-story brick with the white stone cornices and the tall plantation-manor style pillars. It wasn't Jess Cobb's ancestral home; his ancestors had worked all day in the cotton and the corn till their hands and feet were sore. But he prized that home as if it had belonged to his ancestors, and its azalea garden and goldfish pool and the snaky-winding flagstone walk.

Inside, Jess Cobb opened his study door. He was about common tall, lean enough to look younger than he was, with the hawky face that meant a drop of Indian blood from the generations when this country was still a parcel of colonies. He wore a string-tie and an old jacket and tobacco-brown pants. There was gray in his black hair.

"Ollie!" he shouted along the hall that went from front to back of the house. "You in bed yet?"

The kitchen door opened, across and farther back. Old Ollie looked out, with red suspenders over his striped shirt, his bald black head shiny. His eyes slanted above high cheekbones. If Jess Cobb had a far-off Indian look, Ollie favored a Chinese with soot on his face.

"Reading me the paper is all, Mr.

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Jess," said Ollie, in a voice as deep as the run of a slow branch creek. "Kind of tired tonight, gouging up that stone to fix the waterpipe."

"Is the family all home, Ollie?"

"Yes, seh. Mis' Virginia just done got back from her lady-club. The young folks is in they rooms."

"Ask them to come down here, will you?"

"Yes, seh, soon's I put me my white coat on."

Mayor Jess Cobb stepped back into the study and shut the door. It was a big study, with chairs and bookshelves and a safe, and a desk piled with papers and ledgers. Beside the desk sat a middle-aged pudgy little man with a loud clip-on bow tie and big checks on his jacket. His potato-colored hair made long pointy sideburns in front of his flat ears. His eyes were dull and gray and mean, like two bullets. He grinned, with a mess of creasy wrinkles, like somebody who likes the bottle too much.

"You done good for yourself, Jess boy," he said. "This nice house, all your land and money and business, being mayor and big in politics. You even got you a faithful old nigger man to do your orders."

"Call Ollie a nigger," replied Jess Cobb, "and I'll throw you clear across the street."

"I wouldn't want that to happen." The creasy grin got bigger and nastier. "I won't call him that no more."

The pudgy little man sat and grinned as Jess Cobb stood by the door and scowled.

In came Virginia Cobb. She looked like the right kind of wife for Live Oak's mayor to have, round-faced and pleasant-eyed, with a comfortably nice figure. Her light hair was cut short and curled. She wore a black jersey dress, and her only jewelry was a thin gold bracelet. The man sitting by the desk didn't get up when she walked through the door.

"What is it, Jess?" Virginia Cobb asked her husband.

"Wait till the children get here, honey."

Then Hulda came in. She'd been out to a steak fry, she wore plaid slacks and a pink cashmere sweater. In one sun-browned hand she carried a black purse. Nineteen and slim, she moved like a girl who played tennis and high-dived and rode. Her whiskey-brown hair hung to her shoulders—not the newest style, but it suited Hulda. She hung her red mouth about a half-inch open, to look like the glamor girls in the fashion magazines. Behind her came Joe John, seventeen and by far the biggest person in the room. He had a brickbat jaw and crewcut dark hair, and wasn't as studious as his glasses made him look. He'd scrimmaged his heart out at football practice all week, hoping to start at left tackle for Live Oak High next Saturday.

"Sit down, you all," Jess Cobb told them, and they did so, and waited. Jess Cobb wet his wide, thin Indian-looking lips with his tongue.

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"You've been wondering who this stranger was, who came just after supper to talk to me so long," he went on. "His name's Lynn Dockery. I knew him years back, before I was married." He set his bright black eyes on the man he'd called Lynn Dockery. "He says he wants to tell you all something."

Lynn Dockery crinkled his face. "You really say for me to, Jess boy?"

"I'm calling your bluff," said Jess Cobb.

"I never crawfished a bluff yet." Lynn Dockery's bullet eyes quartered from Virginia Cobb to Hulda, then to Joe John. "Glad to be knowing you folks. Like Jess here says, him and me is old friends. Worked together, years back. Ever hear of Johnny Aber?"

He stopped. But they didn't say whether they'd heard of Johnny Aber or not. They sat and waited for him to go on. He did so.

"Too bad if nobody remembers Johnny Aber. He used to run the slot machines and crap games all through the Carolinas, up into Virginia, across the mountains into Tennessee. Your daddy—Jess here—worked for him, about twenty-five years back, and me, too."

Lynn Dockery cocked an eye at Jess Cobb. "Right, Jess?"

"Right."

Again Lynn Dockery waited. Nobody said anything. His smile crinkled tighter.

"Me and Jess did the leg work—collections and installations and all like that. We fixed cops—paid them off not to bother the machines. Big poker or crap games up at an Asheville convention or down at the seashore, we bankrolled them and oversaw them and collected Johnny Aber's cut. Johnny was the brains, and nobody brainier. Right, Jess?"

"Right," said Jess Cobb again. "He was smart."

"We done right well working for Johnny, me and Jess did. Good pay, interesting job, and we could always high-grade a percentage into our own pockets when we collected. Jess, do I tell the truth?"

"Not when you say I high-graded any money," said Jess Cobb. "I took my pay from Johnny, and that was all. I never knocked down a nickel on him or anybody else. You were the one did that sort of thing."

"Maybe so, maybe so." Lynn Dockery took out a cigarette. "Mind if I smoke, Mrs. Cobb?"

"Go ahead," she bade him, softly.

"Anyway, one day Johnny said I'd held out part of the money I'd taken in for him." Lynn Dockery put the cigarette in his mouth. "We got to hot words, and he hit me, and I out with a gun and shot him." He struck a match. "Shot him dead, folks. Went to prison. If I hadn't pleaded guilty, I'd have gone to the chair. They had it back then, before the gas chamber." He lighted the cigarette and blew smoke. "Now I'm paroled out. I'm broke. I need help." He nodded to Virginia Cobb. "Does all this make sense, ma'am?"

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"You're telling me nothing new," she said in her soft voice. "Jess told me all about it before we were married."

There was silence again. Jess Cobb's black eyes studied his wife, and he nearly smiled at her.

"Why did you come to Jess?" Virginia Cobb asked Lynn Dockery.

"Well," and he blew more smoke, and hiked his shoulders. "My luck's been mighty poor, like I told you. Jess had all the good luck. He wasn't there when I shot Johnny, else he might have got into the shooting. He'd have sure got into the trial. But he was out of town that day, and he dropped out of sight. His name never come into it. Johnny was dead and didn't talk, and I was alive but I didn't talk either. Never put my mouth to the name of Jess Cobb. I went to the sneezer all by myself, for twenty-five years."

"Would it have helped you to give my name to the law?" asked Jess Cobb.

"No, I don't really reckon so. But I'm out now, and broke. You had money enough to go into something else—"

"Something lawful and honest," said Virginia Cobb.

"Sure enough, ma'am," agreed Lynn Dockery. "Jess has got up to be the foremost man in this part of your county. He's got money, I don't have any. Looks like he could take care of me." A pause. "Maybe two thousand dollars or so to begin with."

"You came to blackmail him," said Virginia Cobb. "If he wouldn't pay you, you'd tell his family this story. Is that it?"

"Now, I didn't want to hurt you and your nice young kids—" began Lynn Dockery.

"You're the one who's apt to get hurt," she broke him off.

The creasy grin spread around the cigarette. "Who'd hurt me, ma'am?"

"I would," she promised him.

"Let me ask Mr. Dockery a question." That was Joe John, leaning forward where he sat by the door, and his young voice was nearly as deep as old Ollie's. "You said two thousand dollars to begin with. How much more later on?"

Lynn Dockery squinted his eyes. "I don't know just how to answer that one, sonny."

"Then I'll ask you another," said Joe John. "How would you like a punch in the jaw? Or," and Joe John got up, mighty quick and quiet for a boy that big, "how'd you like two punches, the second one after you got up from the first? You wouldn't be getting up from the second, I'll guarantee you that."

Lynn Dockery stopped grinning. "You trying to scare me?"

"Get on your feet," said Joe John, and snatched off his glasses.

"Wait, brother," said Hulda. "Let me say something."

Lynn Dockery turned toward her. She'd forgotten to keep her mouth open. It was tight now, and it looked Indian-thin, like her father's.

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"I hope you got sense to talk," Lynn Dockery told her. "I've heard a right much about you. Going to marry a nice young doctor's son, a nice, polite, generous young college fellow."

"Nice and polite," she repeated, "and generous. He gave me a present, right tonight." She opened the purse in her lap, and put her hand in. "Here it is."

Out she took a little black automatic with a pearl handle.

"You make trouble for us," she said, "and I'll put a hole in your face right over the eyes."

Lynn Dockery studied the little gun Hulda had taken out, and the squinty eyes got wide and shaky.

Jess Cobb tilted back his head. "All right, Lynn," he said. "You said that if I wouldn't pay off, you'd see what my folks thought about your story. And now you've heard what they think about it."

Still Lynn Dockery kept quiet.

"Go along now, folks," said Jess Cobb to his family. "Thanks for listening to all this. I'll see him out of the house."

Joe John put on his glasses and walked into the hall. His mother followed, meeting Jess Cobb's dark eyes with her blue ones for just a thought of time. Hulda went last. She kept the gun in her hand, and over her shoulder she watched Lynn Dockery. Jess Cobb waited until he heard them on the stairs.

"Time for you to go too, Lynn," he said then.

Lynn Dockery got to his feet. He looked shorter standing up than sitting down. He and Jess Cobb walked into the hall, and Jess Cobb opened the big front door. Lynn Dockery stepped out on the porch.

"Nice family you got, Jess," he said.

"You and I won't quarrel about that."

"I never figured you'd be smart enough to tell your wife everything."

"I wasn't that smart," Jess Cobb answered. "Tonight was the first word she ever heard of my working for Johnny Aber."

"Why, she said—"

"Sure. She said I'd told her. That's the kind of folks I've got. They could give you a hard time, Lynn. Any one of them—or all of them."

"That's a fact," nodded Lynn Dockery. "I won't be seeing any of them again, Jess."

"No."

"Think I'll go now and talk to some boys in the north end of the county."

"What boys?" asked Jess.

"Oh, just some politicians. Boys that would like to see a rough story out on you. Then," said Lynn Dockery, "you wouldn't be so important around here. You'd be out of the way so those other boys could make things happen to suit them better, around the county seat."

Jess Cobb looked Lynn Dockery up and down, from foot to head and back again, the way you look to pick out a good place to hit a man.

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"Do that," he said, "and your troubles will be over for good."

"Sure my troubles will be over, Jess." Lynn Dockery had his creasy grin back. "Those up-county boys won't be so stingy with a few dollars when I tell them what I have to tell them." Lynn Dockery started down the porch steps. "Watch the newspapers for what I tell them."

"Wait!" said Jess Cobb, sharp and hard.

But Lynn Dockery only laughed, out in the night.

"Too late for that, Jess boy."

The next morning, when the Cobbs came down to breakfast, old Ollie stood with the coffeepot in his hand.

"That little white gentleman that was here last night," he said deeply to Jess Cobb.

Jess Cobb looked up quickly. "What about him, Ollie?"

"He laying dead out there on the lawn, Mr. Jess."

Jess Cobb walked quick to the front window and stared out.

A pudgy little somebody lay on the grass, just beyond the snaky turn in the flagstone walk and clear of it. A checked jacket showed rumpled. Joe John saw, too, and started for the door.

"Stay in here, Joe John," said Jess Cobb. "Everybody stay in here. You sure he's dead, Ollie?"

"Dead and cold, Mr. Jess."

Jess Cobb went into the hall and picked up the telephone. He said a county seat number into it. "Hello," he said. "Sheriff's office? Is that you, Bunch? This is Jess Cobb. I've got a dead body in my yard. Better bring the coroner."

Half an hour later Sheriff Bunch Martin ran his car up the driveway. The sheriff got out, and Dr. Hickman, the coroner, and a deputy. They all stopped a minute around the quiet-lying Lynn Dockery. Then Sheriff Martin came onto the porch. Jess Cobb opened the door before the sheriff knocked.

"We're all in the dining room, Bunch."

Bunch Martin followed Jess Cobb in, nodded to Virginia Cobb and winked at Joe John. Bunch Martin was a tall skinny old man with a nose like a cucumber.

"We know who he is," he said. "There was a pickup out for him. His name's Lynn Dockery. State prison parolee, and wanted for sneak thieving in two towns."

"Is he really dead, Sheriff Martin?" asked Hulda.

"He sure enough is. Got a hole in his face right over the eyes."

There was absolute quiet, long enough for somebody to count a slow six. Then:

"I shot him," said Virginia Cobb.

Bunch Martin sat down quick, and put his elbow on the table cloth. "You shot him?"

"I saw him hanging around in the yard last night. Thought he was trying to break in here. I shot him."

"No," Hulda put in, sharp and

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quick, and all the faces spun toward her. "That man was bothering me last night after the steak fry," Hulda went on in a sort of dull voice. "Followed me home. I told him I'd shoot him—said what you said, Mr. Martin, I'd put a hole in his face over the eyes. And I did." She wouldn't look at Virginia Cobb. "Mother heard me say it. She's trying to take the blame for me."

"No, you're trying to take the blame for me," spoke up Joe John's deep young voice. "He passed a remark I didn't like, and I got a gun—"

"Why, Joe John," said Bunch Martin, "you wouldn't do a thing like that. You ain't only but seventeen."

"Haven't you heard about juvenile delinquents, Sheriff?" asked Joe John.

"Wait," began Jess Cobb. "I—"

"You're going to confess," said Bunch Martin. He didn't ask it, he said it. He pinched his lips together under the cucumber nose.

"You sound like somebody who knows the truth, Bunch," the mayor of Live Oak brought out the dead words. "All right. I was the one who shot him. Let's go out and get in the car. I'll make you a confession at your office."

Bunch Martin hiked one skinny leg over the sharp knee of the other.

"So all of you shot him," he grumbled, "Which am I going to believe?"

He waited, just about the way Lynn Dockery had waited last night, for somebody to answer. And, just the way it had been when Lynn Dockery waited, nobody said anything.

"I'll tell you which," said the sheriff. "None of you."

"I shot—" began Jess Cobb.

"This man wasn't shot," the sheriff told him.

"You said a hole in his face right over the eyes," Hulda reminded.

The tight smile appeared under the cucumber nose again. "It wasn't a bullet hole, Miss Hulda. It was punched in there." His eyes were bothered. "Who found him dead?"

"It was old Ollie," said Virginia Cobb.

"Get him in here," said the sheriff, and Joe John stepped to the hall door and called Ollie's name. Ollie came in, his white coat clean as fresh-picked cotton, his slant eyes level.

"They say you found that dead man this morning," said Bunch Martin.

"Yes, seh. Went out there, sunup about, to do a little job—"

"What job, Ollie?" asked Bunch Martin.

"Yesterday I pull out one of them big walk stones to dig around the waterpipe underneath of it, so's I can fix a leaky joint. I wanted to set it back, seh. Got out there, I see this white gentleman laying on his face like. He step his foot into the hole where that walk stone was took out. Just out there at the turn of the walk. And he done fling himself down."

"Fell dead?" asked the sheriff.

"No, seh. The turnoff rod there

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in the socket place where we cut the water off. He hit on that, seh. Top of the rod done go right into his head."

Ollie's long dark finger touched his broad dark forehead, an inch above the slanting brow.

"So you saw he was dead. What did you do?"

"I done pull the rod out of him—"

"What on earth for, Ollie?" Bunch Martin whooped, so loud that everybody jumped half out of their chairs.

"Well, maybe he ain't dead yet, I think. So—"

Bunch Martin got up, walked into the hall, and opened the front door. "Sam!" he called.

The deputy looked up from where he and Dr. Hickman were spreading a blanket over Lynn Dockery's body. A black, secret-looking hearse was nosing into the driveway.

"Find that thing with the blood on it and bring it here," said Bunch Martin, and then came back to the dining room. "What else did you do, Ollie?"

"Put back the walk stone I taken out yesterday—"

"Ollie," Bunch Martin wailed. He sat down again, as if his legs had gone weak and sick. "Don't you know better than to mess up the scene of an accidental death? What did you put back that stone for?"

"Why, seh," said Ollie, "that what I done went out there to get done. Put the stone back. Wasn't that all right?"

Bunch Martin wagged his head, slow and disgusted. "All right, all right. Then what?"

"I come back in right quick, seh. Mr. Jess and his folks was setting down for they breakfast. I done told Mr. Jess, and he done told you."

Sam the deputy walked in. He carried a sort of lean iron cross. Its upright bar was an inch thick and maybe three feet tall, and at the bottom end it was forged square. Six inches or so from the top, another bar was welded across, about a foot long. The upper two inches of the vertical bar showed wet and sticky.

"Is that what you mean by the turnoff rod?" the sheriff asked Ollie, but Ollie only shuffled his feet, embarrassed.

"There's a socket in the pipe on the lawn, Bunch," explained Jess Cobb. "Right next to the curve in the walk. You put that thing in the socket and turn it to cut off the water."

"And that's what this man Lynn Dockery fell on?" Bunch Martin asked.

"It was sticking up there," said Ollie. "When he step in the hole, he go down off the walk, he was heading just right to fall down on the turnoff rod."

"All right, Sam," Bunch Martin said, and the deputy carried the turnoff rod outside again.

"Well," said Bunch Martin to the whole room, "it couldn't have happened to a better guy, Jess."

"How do you figure it took place?" asked Jess Cobb.

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"He must have been fixing to prowl your house last night. He was sneaking around the yard, and down he fell. It was his own fault he got killed like that. If he'd been where he was supposed to be, he'd be alive today."

"You want anything else, seh?" asked Ollie.

"I'll write out a report," the sheriff told him, "and one of my boys will bring it over for you to sign."

"I'll sure be proud to do that, seh," agreed Ollie, and went back away to his kitchen.

Bunch Martin lit a long, thin, yellow, cheap cigar.

"I never seen the beat, or anywhere near the beat, of what kind of liar you Cobb folks are," he confessed. "Must be a family trait, like being important in politics. Sure enough, you all of you wanted to be a martyr. Each one thought somebody else in the family had murdered this Lynn Dockery. So each one wanted to protect the other one."

"You make us sound silly," said Jess Cobb for them all.

"That's what lots of folks would call it, Jess. Silly. So why don't you and me and all of us keep from talking about how eager you wanted to confess what you didn't do?"

"Will that be the way to handle it?" asked Virginia Cobb.

"Sure. It was just an accidental death. Talking about how you all acted here would be as big a waste of time as it was for you all to act thataway."

"You make sense, Bunch," approved Jess Cobb. "Have some coffee with us."

"No." Bunch Martin got up. "I've got to help cart that dead fellow away. Good day to you, folks. Election time, don't forget the poor."

"The poor?" repeated Hulda.

"Poor old Bunch Martin."

"We never forgot you any election time these past twelve years," said Jess Cobb.

"Come see us again," said Virginia Cobb.

"I'll do that thing. And you all come see me and Miss Ivy at the county seat. But don't tell her this tale, either."

When the sheriff and the deputy and the coroner and the corpse were all gone from the yard, Jess Cobb walked out on his front porch and sat down. He looked out where the curve showed in the flagstone walk.

After a while Ollie tramped into sight around the corner of the house. "Come up here," Jess Cobb bade him, and Ollie came up.

"There won't be any more trouble about what happened out yonder," said Jess Cobb.

"No, seh. The sheriff done said that."

"Yes, he said that." Jess Cobb leaned back to watch Ollie's dark face. "But you know and I know that you put that flagstone back last night before supper. And that turnoff rod was out in the tool shed. I saw you take it there."

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Ollie looked at Jess Cobb. "Anybody else see me do that?"

"I don't think so. Just me. All right, Ollie, why did you go out last night and take up the stone again and put the turnoff rod in the socket? You knew he'd be bound to trip in the hole and fall on the rod."

"Yes, seh," agreed Ollie. "Little short gentleman like that, he barely big enough for his face to catch on it."

"Why?" asked Jess Cobb again. "Ollie, might you have been listening outside the study door when we were all in there talking?"

Ollie looked just a bit ashamed.

"Don't do that very often, seh. Only when I ought to be knowing what going on in this house." Ollie nodded. "He wanted you to pay him some money, seh."

"You never mentioned that to the sheriff, though."

"Why," said Ollie, "if I done that, I'd be obliged to tell why I taken up the stone and set the rod. I didn't reckon that would sound good for the sheriff to hear, about how come you used to be knowing that little fat gentleman."

Jess Cobb smiled, for the first time since supper last night.

"He was holding you up for something, Mr. Jess," elaborated Ollie.

"Are you going to hold me up for something?"

"Maybe so, Mr. Jess." Ollie shifted from one foot to the other. "You lately been making some talk about getting a cook here."

Jess Cobb smiled broader. "That's right. Divide up the work, with somebody to cook and sweep up while you look after the outside. Why, Ollie? You got some good woman in mind for the job?"

"No, seh, no woman. Mr. Jess, you know my boy Hedrick. He cooked in the army, after that on Pullman trains, but he's back in these parts now. He could do the cooking good. He need the job."

"All right," granted Jess Cobb. "Have him come go to work, Ollie. Tell him he's hired."

"Why," said Ollie, "Hedrick got here just a few minutes back. He peeling carrots in the kitchen this minute."

Jess Cobb slid back his shirt sleeve and looked at the watch on his lean wrist.

"Ten o'clock," he read the dial. "That's not awful early in the morning. Ollie, you reckon you can teach Hedrick to make a mint julep the way I like it?"

"I done show him that, Mr. Jess, way long back." Ollie shuffled his feet again. "You want me to tell him bring you one out here?"

"Tell him to bring two juleps out here," said Jess Cobb. "One for me and one for you. Let's judge together how good a julep-maker your boy Hedrick is."

"Yes, seh," said Ollie.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HELEN McCLOY**

TITLE: ***Shock Tactics***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Dr. Basil Willing, psychiatrist

LOCALE: Eastport, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Dr. Willing speaking: "If insanity is split personality, a blunder is a microscopic splinter of personality. So, when a criminal is trapped by a blunder, he is trapped by the testimony of the Invisible Witness . . ."*

DR. BASIL WILLING HAD NOT BEEN long in Eastport before he met the Blounts, Dick and Clara. They were gay, unreflective extroverts, the last people Willing expected to consult him professionally. But, when Dick telephoned that bland morning in May, he was in a highly emotional state.

"I've just found out you're some sort of big shot in New York. Psychiatric assistant to the District Attorney, is that it? And you're working here with the State Police.

"I know you're busy, but I must see you today and I can't ask you to the house without alarming Clara. Could you meet me at the Old Mill Tavern at six sharp? Swell . . ."

Willing's lean face was thoughtful as he put down the telephone. The Blounts had been married fourteen years. They were the most devoted couple in town, as well as the handsomest. Clara was all slender elegance—hair, a burnished chestnut; eyes, a dark, lively hazel. Dick was tall, with water-blue eyes and pale blond hair. They had met when both were radio actors. Now Dick was a successful TV script writer.

In the Tavern, at six o'clock, Will-

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ing found Blount in Ye Olde Colonial Barre, nursing a double Gibson, with one eye on the clock.

"Thank God, you're here, Willing! How would you like to get a thing like this in the morning mail?"

It was a scrap of blue-lined paper, torn from a notebook. On it someone had written in pencil: *Thy brother Death came, and cried, "Wouldst thou me?"*

"What the devil does it mean?" demanded Dick Blount.

Willing smiled and went on, *"Thy sweet child, Sleep, the filmy-eyed . . . Shall I nestle near thy side?"* . . . Of course. Shelley."

With closed eyes, Dick searched his own memories of school days. *Death will come when thou art dead, Soon, too soon—*

He frowned at the gathering darkness beyond the windows. "It's horrible—out of context."

"Was the envelope addressed to you in the same hand?"

"It was in the same hand," Dick answered grimly. "But it wasn't addressed to me." He tossed a grubby envelope on the bar. The postmark had been torn when the envelope was opened. Only the word *Eastport* was still legible. But the inscription was clear: *Mrs. Richard Blount, Fox Den Road, Eastport.*

"Fortunately I got down to breakfast before Clara this morning. I opened this by mistake. I couldn't show it to her. She's terribly sensitive. She would have gone to pieces. I was afraid the local police would laugh, so—I thought of you. A psychiatrist who has specialized in criminology might get something out of the wording or handwriting."

"The writer is feminine and probably young," said Willing. "Shelley is an adolescent's poet. And she's unhappy—the words slant downhill in spite of the lined paper. Anyone you know fit that?"

Dick frowned. "We had a young village girl as maid until a week ago. Janey Emmett. A diamond brooch of Clara's vanished when Janey was the only other person who'd been in the house, besides ourselves. We couldn't accuse her without more evidence. We gave her a week's wages and let her go."

"I'd like to see a specimen of her writing."

"I've got some canceled checks she endorsed, at my office. The building will be closed now, but I have a latchkey."

"I didn't know you had an office in Eastport."

"We live in a ranch house. When the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, and TV are all going on one floor, it's impossible to think, let alone write. My office is on Main Street."

"Why don't you lead the way in your own car?" suggested Willing. "I'll follow in mine."

Soon both cars were on the main street of the prosperous commuters' town. Dick parked his car in front of a four-story building. When Willing joined him at the front door, he had

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found the latchkey on his ring. He unlocked the door and switched on a hall light. "No elevator—this isn't New York."

The building was a Victorian mansion converted into offices. The broad stairs curved gracefully upward, evoking ghosts of the demure ladies of another era. As they reached the third floor, they heard a familiar jangling.

"Is that your phone?" asked Willing.

"I hope not. I'll never get this door open in time." Blount fitted another key in the lock of the office door. "Hey, it is mine!" He darted across the room and picked up the phone.

"Hello? . . . Clara, you just caught me!"

Willing strolled over to the windows and pretended to be deaf.

"Now?" The voice was so changed that Willing was instantly tense. Dick's face was ghastly in the faint light from the hall. "Call the police! . . . Clara! *Clara!*"

Blount dropped the phone. His voice rattled like a flag in a high wind.

"Good God! She called because someone was prowling outside the house. I just heard a crash—glass, I think. She screamed. I heard a shot and then . . . nothing . . ."

It was Willing who dialed the State Police barracks. He slammed the phone back in its cradle. "Now what's the quickest way to your house? You're in no condition to drive."

The ranch house was stone, prettily dressed in vines and shrubbery, standing back from the road in two acres of garden. A State Police car was already parked in the driveway and, beyond it, an express company's truck.

There was no hall. In Western fashion, the front door led directly into the living room, but no working ranch house ever had a living room like this. Painted walls, velvety carpet, and filmy nylon curtains were all the same pale, primrose yellow. The furniture was black, ebony or teak, upholstered in ivory and gold.

The only pictures were antique Chinese. There were no fireplaces, no heirlooms, no books or children's toys. Willing felt as if he had walked into a stage setting rather than a home—the sort of stage setting that wins a special word of praise from critics as "excitingly contemporary" or "theatrically effective."

It was hard to believe in the reality of the smashed picture window and the pieces of glass glittering like slabs of thin ice. It was harder to believe that the body on the floor of the alcove beyond the living room was really a dead woman and not a dummy, artfully contrived by an experienced stage manager.

She wore a flowing housecoat of ivory silk, shot with silver threads that echoed the sparkle of the diamond brooch at her throat. Her bright, chestnut hair and painted, scarlet lips stood out vividly against

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the deathly white of her skin. She might have been asleep, except for the forehead, smooth and hard as marble, where something had drilled a small hole, ragged and bluish at the edges.

On one side of her a phone receiver dangled the length of its cord from a small table. On the other side lay a deer rifle.

"My own gun . . ." Blount's voice broke. "And that's the diamond brooch that was missing . . ."

He didn't approach the alcove. He turned away to the broken window as if this final irony was more than he could bear.

A lieutenant of State Police greeted Willing. "How long would you say she's been dead, doctor?"

Willing made a quick examination. "If I didn't know otherwise, I would say she could have died any time within the last hour. As it is, I can be more accurate. Mr. Blount heard the shot over the telephone just fifteen minutes ago. Tell him, Dick."

Blount managed to get out the necessary words. He was so shaken that the lieutenant turned back to Willing with relief.

"Then you both heard the office phone ringing at about six fifteen and Mrs. Blount was talking to her husband when he heard the window crash over the phone. She must have looked up and seen an intruder. She screamed when he snatched her husband's rifle." The lieutenant glanced at an empty gunrack on the wall. "And she dropped the phone when she was shot. Of course, you broke the connection when you used the phone in Blount's downtown office to dial our barracks."

"Who is . . ." Willing broke off. He was looking questioningly toward the far end of the long room. A state trooper stood there, guarding a girl and a boy.

The girl's dark eyes were as pleading and vulnerable as the eyes of a schoolgirl—loose white sweater, pale blue skirt, white moccasins. Her hair was a lovely bronze-gold raggedly cut, without beauty parlor arts. She was holding one of the boy's hands tightly in her own.

He was only a year or so older, but where she seemed on the edge of panic he was collected and sullen. A big boy with hot, brown eyes and a tormented mouth. His crew cut brutalized his plain face. His sport shirt and jeans were soiled and shabby.

Dick Blount was looking in the same direction. His voice was strained, thin and high. "That's Janey Emmett!"

"And the boy?"

"I'm Frank Denby and I don't know a thing about this. Neither does Janey. You have no right to hold us. I'll call my father. I'll get a lawyer. I'll—"

"Wait," said Willing, quietly. "Why are you here?"

"I drive a truck for the express company. This afternoon, about four, I delivered a package from

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New York to Mrs. Blount and she signed for it. When I got back to the office, I found she had signed the wrong name. I like to keep my records straight, so I came back here, about six thirty, on my own time, to get her to sign the slip properly with her correct name. See, here it is."

He held out a small slip of yellow paper. Willing read the name aloud: "*Clara Drexel.* A stage name?"

"No," said Blount. "Her maiden name. Just a slip of the pen. She's done it before. I can't see what difference it makes."

"The package was addressed to Clara Blount," retorted the boy. "I didn't want any mix-up."

"Was it something valuable?"

"Just face powder, but expensive. I know because some spilled on the carpet when she put the package on the phone table. She said it was a new powder, blended for her in New York, and it cost so much they should have wrapped it properly."

"What happened when you got here the second time?"

"Everything!" The boy was bitter. "I saw lights and a broken window. I rang the bell and Janey came to the door. Of course I know her. We're both Eastporters and we went to school together. She looked scared to death.

"She said: 'Oh, Frank, Mrs. Blount's dead. She's been shot.' I saw the body then. I said: 'We must call the police.' Janey began to cry and I was trying to comfort her when the state cops came and found us."

"And now let's have your story, Miss Emmett."

Janey's frightened glance fled about the room. "I—I found her dead only a few moments before Frank got here."

"Why were you here?"

Janey shrank back. "Do I have to tell? . . . Until a week ago I worked here as a maid. I didn't like the job, but Mother's a widow and there just isn't enough money for secretarial training or anything like that. A week ago Mrs. Blount lost a diamond brooch. She said she never mislaid things. She didn't tell me I had taken it, but I know she thought I had, because she fired me. She must have told other people she suspected me, because I couldn't get another job in Eastport, even as a maid.

"Then, this afternoon, she phoned me about four o'clock and said she had found the brooch. She asked me to come here this evening at six fifteen so we could talk about my getting my old job back. I thought if she took me back for a while it would stop all the talk about my being a thief, so I came and . . . she was dead."

The girl began to cry helplessly. The boy put his arm around her. "Take it easy, Janey," he whispered.

Willing turned to Blount. "Did you know the brooch had been found?"

"Of course not. I went to the office at two p.m. and worked there until I met you at the Tavern at six,

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so I couldn't know if it was found at four. I doubt if it was. We have only this girl's word for it. She could have pinned the brooch to Clara's dress after she shot Clara. A clever trick to explain her presence here this evening and clear herself of all suspicion of theft. Not only that, but it destroys her motive for murder."

"Oh, no!" the girl cried out. "How can you be so cruel? I didn't kill her! I didn't!"

"Did you write this?" Willing held out the slip of lined paper.

"Thy brother Death . . . Why, that's Shelley. I remember studying that poem at high school last year. I must have written it then in my notebook. I still have that book. I use the blank pages for addresses and phone numbers now."

"Did you have it when you were employed here?"

"I don't remember. I may have."

Willing drew the police lieutenant away from the others and lowered his voice. "Blount says this scrap of paper was sent to his wife by mail this morning."

The lieutenant read the words aloud. *"Thy brother Death came, and cried, 'Wouldst thou me?'* Not a nice thing to get anonymously in the morning mail. But it's not a nice thing to be accused of theft, if you're innocent.

"Mrs. Blount thought she was being magnanimous when she didn't prosecute. Actually, she was denying the girl a chance to defend herself openly. Mrs. Blount talked and the girl couldn't get another job. If she killed Mrs. Blount after sending that anonymous threat it would be premeditated murder . . . and she's only in her teens!

"Even if this note is in her writing, it will be hard to prove that she wrote it for that purpose and not just as part of her English course last year. What about the envelope? Same writing?"

Willing nodded. "Yes, but the defense could say it might have contained something else when it was sent to Mrs. Blount. The prosecution would have to prove that no one else could have obtained the scrap of paper and the envelope and mailed them to Mrs. Blount."

"Who else could have obtained an envelope mailed here except Mr. Blount? And he's out of it because you were with him when he took the call from Mrs. Blount at the office and heard her shot over the phone."

Willing looked at the four faces in the other room. The lieutenant had never seen a more searching gaze.

"I detest these cases that go into the unsolved file when everyone knows who is guilty and no one can prove it," Willing said. "This one will never be solved by ordinary methods. Mind if I try shock tactics?"

"Go ahead."

"I'll have to make a phone call first." Willing dialed a number, spoke quietly, and listened a few

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moments. "Thank you." He replaced the receiver.

"You think the boy did it alone?" asked the lieutenant. "Why couldn't they have done it together? I know he's been in love with her ever since they were in high school. A boy might feel quite a lot of resentment if his girl were charged with theft, whether it was true or not."

"You're thinking only of the physical evidence," returned Willing. "You've missed the psychological clue to the murderer—the testimony of the Invisible Witness."

"What do you mean? It has to be the girl or the boy or both. There aren't any other suspects."

"Is that all you make of the boy's story?"

Willing led the way back to the living room. "Miss Emmett, did you go into the alcove at any time after you reached the house at six fifteen?"

"Oh, no!" Janey was astonished. "I could see she was dead. I didn't want to go near her."

"And you, Denby?"

"No. The cops got here just after I did. I was still standing by the doorway with Janey."

"Were you standing close to Mrs. Blount earlier this afternoon when the powder spilled on the carpet in the alcove?"

"No. I was going out the front door when I heard her exclaim and I turned to look. She was mad. I said: 'Sorry, ma'am, but I didn't wrap that package,' and went on out."

"She was killed by a contact shot" said Willing. "You can see the ragged, blue edges of the wound. Whoever shot her stood close to her in the alcove after the powder was spilled on the carpet there. Expensive face powder is fine and clinging. There will be some chemical traces of it on the murderer's shoes even if he or she has tried to wipe them clean. Do you still say that *neither* of you stepped into the alcove this afternoon?"

They looked like children, trapped by some devious, adult device they couldn't possibly have anticipated. Then Janey gasped: "It's the truth. I didn't."

Frank said boldly, "Neither did I. You can send my shoes to the lab, if you like."

Willing turned to Blount. "Was your wife's life insured?"

"Of course. We were each insured, with the other as beneficiary. You can't be suggesting that I . . ."

"Why not?"

A thick flush darkened Blount's fair skin. "You were with me in my office when I got the phone call from Clara. You heard me talking to her."

"But I didn't hear *her talking to you!* I couldn't hear anything from her end of the line. All I heard was your voice saying: 'Clara.' Even if I'd been listening on an extension, I couldn't have heard Clara's voice then, for she was already dead."

"Are you insane? You heard that phone ringing as we came upstairs together. I didn't call Clara. She

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called me. You saw me pick up the phone. If it wasn't Clara calling who was it?"

"'Thy brother Death,'" answered Willing. "In other words—no one. Your office building was empty all evening after five until you and I got there just after six. This house was empty after Clara was shot and that could have been shortly before six, judging by the condition of the body. How simple for you to shoot Clara at five thirty, then pick up this phone, dial your own office number and hurry out to meet me at the Tavern, leaving this phone *off the hook*—as if Clara had dropped it when she was shot.

"There was no one at either end of the line to break the connection. A dial phone is purely automatic. There is nothing to stop it ringing, unless someone breaks the connection at one end or the other. It can ring for hours or even days without attracting attention if the building at either end remains empty. I checked with the phone company a moment ago and they confirm this.

"The whole story of the diamond brooch was a fabrication. You took it yourself and encouraged your wife to believe that Janey had stolen it. You knew your wife well enough to know that she would gossip about the affair and that Janey would hear that gossip and resent it.

"You then arranged for your wife to find the brooch this afternoon. You urged her to call Janey and make an appointment for six fifteen this evening, so Janey would be found with the dead body when the police arrived.

"You timed your interview with me at the Tavern so that you and I would reach your office at six fifteen while the phone there was still ringing—before Janey had any chance to break the connection from this end." Willing stopped for a moment. Then a touch of wryness came into his voice. "No wonder you had your eye on the clock when I met you. You're a TV script writer, accustomed to thinking of dialogue in terms of seconds—a page a minute, isn't it? Of course you tore the scrap of paper from Janey's notebook when she was employed here and the envelope was one she had sent your wife with some other note inside. The postmark is torn and illegible. We have only your word for it that the envelope came in this morning's mail."

Blount's flush had faded. Now his anger was white-hot. "Are you suggesting I did all this for insurance money?"

"Not for money alone." Willing sighed. "You and Clara were known as the most devoted couple in Eastport, but do you think that a married woman will sign her maiden name accidentally *after fourteen years of marriage,* and do it more than once, if she is happily married?

"There is no such thing as accident in any human action. A slip of the pen is prompted by a wish of

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the 'counter-will' in the unconscious mind, and it reveals the emotional state as truly as a dream. If insanity is split personality, a blunder is a microscopic splinter of personality—the dream-mind taking over mastery of body and motor nerves in a lightning-flash for a few thousandths of a second, and then retiring in favor of normal consciousness again.

"No one has ever seen an unconscious mind. Unlike the consciousness, it has no visible seat in the brain. It is diffused throughout the body like life itself. So, when a criminal is trapped by a blunder, his own or his victim's, he is trapped by the testimony of the Invisible Witness.

"If a woman is unhappily married and doesn't want a divorce for economic or other reasons, she usually takes considerable pains to revenge herself on her husband by seeing to it that he is unhappy, too, not always realizing that she may drive him to murder."

Willing turned to the lieutenant. "You heard Blount say he left the house at two and did not return here till he came back with me at six thirty? He has not entered the alcove since we came in together, but, if you will have the police laboratory examine his shoes, I am sure you will find chemical traces of the face powder that was spilled there at four—two hours after the time he claims he went to the office."

Blount's face twisted and something ugly looked out of his eyes that Willing had never seen there before. "You would have killed Clara if you'd had to live with her! I'm glad I shot her. I—"

Willing moved to the other end of the room where Janey and Frank were looking at him in wonder.

"If it hadn't been for you, what would have happened to us?" cried Janey. "And yet—he was a friend of yours."

"Not a friend. An acquaintance I had met at a few cocktail parties," answered Willing. "An acquaintance who under-estimated my intelligence when he deliberately chose me as the most convincing witness for his flimsy telephone alibi just because I was on friendly terms with the police."

COMING ATTRACTIONS...

Next Month	Every story in this issue NEW—including a novelette by HUGH PENTECOST
September issue	a new STANLEY ELLIN story
October issue	a new RUFUS KING story
November issue	CORNELL WOOLRICH, AGATHA CHRISTIE

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Most of the characters, if not all, in J. Burne Sargent's "Command Performance" were real people. Both Monsieur de Kempelen and his mechanical prodigy actually existed. True, the chess-playing Turk (as the machine was popularly known) was "exposed" after its arrival in America in 1835, and by none other than Edgar Allan Poe himself. Poe's article, titled "Maelzel's Chess-Player" (originally Kempelen's), is a superb example of deductive reasoning. It was the chief force in hustling the automaton, which for decades had fooled all the chess players of Europe, into the near-obscurity of Philadelphia's Chinese Museum. There the Turk stayed until 1854 when it was reduced to cinders in a fire that demolished the museum.

Poe mentioned the incongruous feather in the mechanical Turk's turban, telling us that "it was not originally there"; but he did not speculate on the motives that prompted M. de Kempelen to build his remarkable Turk in the first place. J. Burne Sargent's tale—an interesting and unusual "first story"—suggests at least one of the reasons why M. de Kempelen constructed his amazing and unbeatable robot . . .

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

by J. BURNE SARGENT

M. DE KEMPELEN, WHO HAD LEFT Vienna some months before, was finishing his last engagement at a small town near the Austrian border.

"Please accept my gratitude, Monsieur," the delighted manager enthused. "Never before has it been my privilege to sponsor such an attraction. Indeed, an auditorium ten times the size of my poor place would have been inadequate!"

The famous mechanician and illusionist seemed disinterested in further praise. "How soon can I cross the border?" he inquired. "I wish to get to Paris with as little delay as possible."

"Tomorrow morning, Monsieur. I have made all arrangements. Is Monsieur planning no exhibitions before that?"

"None," Kempelen said. "I am impatient for Paris." His homesickness was only one reason why he was anxious to get out of Austria.

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He had certain influential connections in Paris that would make his introduction into the court of Louis XVI easy—a great and useful honor that would look well in his advertising.

One would say that royalty was royalty anywhere, but Kempelen hadn't considered pitting his mechanical Turk against the shrewd Maria Theresa of Austria. An imperial summons meant more than just an awkward delay in a carefully planned itinerary. The Empress, while an enthusiastic chess player, found less consolation in the lot of a loser than most people: given the choice between the scarlet *A*—to be branded upon her brow—and a less conspicuous *B*, she would have quickly chosen the first, if the other signified that hateful word *bamboozled*. An encounter with the Empress, in the present circumstances, could be dangerous to M. de Kempelen.

So Kempelen's dark face paled above his vandyke as, a few minutes later, he received the impressive-looking document in his twin dressing-rooms.

"Her Majesty, Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, Archduchess of Austria, having received word that a certain M. de Kempelen is the inventor of a machine known as *The Automaton Chess-Player* and that this same machine is alleged to have vanquished many of the foremost players of Austria, Her Majesty, therefore, expresses her desire to see such a wonder and to engage it in play. For this purpose, M. de Kempelen is requested to proceed with his invention in all haste to Vienna."

Kempelen turned to his lanky assistant—an intelligent but shy youth. Pierre's long, slender fingers and unusual mechanical talents had made him indispensable to the Turk's maintenance. "It's our fiendish fortune," the mechanician exclaimed. "Why, at such a moment does she get the notion to play chess?"

The loquacious manager, who had brought the bad news, was not to be ignored. "Ah! It's Her Majesty's *trouble,* Monsieur," he volunteered in bad French. "Have not you heard to what lengths they go to make her forget it?"

"Trouble? Has Her Majesty suffered some bereavement?"

"Bereavement? Oh, no, Monsieur—it's the Army revolt. Such difficulty it has caused! To please the Empress now is impossible. But surely Monsieur has heard of the Army revolt?"

"I was in England," Kempelen said. "I heard a rumor, but it was some time ago."

"Oh, it was very bad, Monsieur. It was instigated by this hot-tempered Worousky and the business was put down only after much effort and bloodshed and—can you imagine, Monsieur?—this Worousky escaped! Yes. Her Majesty's police? Ah! They have been able to do *nothing*. They have failed miser-

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ably, Monsieur. That is why they say these days that it is unpleasant to live within a day's travel of the Imperial Palace. Monsieur will understand better when he is reminded that Austria has only recently avoided another great war with Prussia; peace is precious to the Empress, now. She is tired of bloodshed—"

"So she summons me—"

"Her Majesty did not, Monsieur, her friends at the palace did—because they are desperate. The finest voices in Vienna, the most magnificent music, Corps de Ballet from St. Petersburg—anything to divert the Empress from this obsession—not forgetting the acrobats and tumblers from Arabia and the jugglers from the East, who come with their metal platters spinning on the bamboo sticks. No, Monsieur, he is a symbol, this Worousky—a symbol of impertinence that has gone unpunished. A symbol, too, of how very inefficient Her Majesty's police are. Even though the villain is dead."

"Dead? Then it would be sensible to forget him," Kempelen said.

"She won't believe it, Monsieur. No. Not even when a man takes an oath he saw Worousky fatally mangled by a cannon ball. They're at their wits' end, Monsieur."

Kempelen scratched his beard. "They have scraped the pot's bottom, so now they send for Kempelen?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur! It's because your fame has spread everywhere in Austria and only the best is considered good enough for Her Majesty. But even the best, Monsieur . . . ah, there it is—Her Majesty's situation is *so* difficult. 'Very diverting,' she says at the end of each entertainment, and then she asks, 'But have we found Worousky?' "

"It is indeed a challenge," Kempelen said.

As the door closed behind the manager, Kempelen glanced at the other door behind which his secret invention, when not working, was always kept under lock and key. "Come," he said quietly to Pierre. "The world has not yet ended."

His assistant pulled his long legs from beneath his chair and looked at his hands in his lap. "It might as well for us, Monsieur Kempelen," he said, glumly. "We'll end up against the firing squad, I'm afraid. I feel it."

"Such a feeling will not help us deceive Maria Theresa," Kempelen said quietly. "But *why* do you feel it? Is it not but one more game of chess?"

"Deceiving chess players is one thing; it can be accomplished with calmness. But an Empress!" The youth did not try to hide the shudder.

"We will have a conference," Kempelen said. "It might well seem a safer strategy to comply with her request than to do otherwise. She is related to the King of France—she could do us much damage in Paris."

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"It is rumored he answers none of her letters," Pierre said, looking up hopefully. "Isn't it possible, Monsieur, that he might be happy to have her snubbed?"

Kempelen was crossing to the locked door, a key in his hand. He hesitated and turned about. "You will not desert me, I am sure, at so critical a moment—"

"Of course not," Pierre said. "But if we do go to . . . Well, I, for one, shall be in considerable discomfort, Monsieur."

Kempelen jammed the key into the lock as if opening the door would decide the whole matter. "I must attend to my Turk. Perhaps he, with his cast-iron interior, will laugh at our qualms."

Distressed or not, Pierre was still on the job when, fifteen days later, they arrived at the capital. They had traveled slowly to protect their precious cargo as much as possible from the jolts of the road. "Eggs, perhaps?" a palace servant asked in simulated innocence, as he helped carry the huge chest so gingerly into the Imperial Palace.

"Merely the work of a lifetime," Kempelen told him. "But we must respect its fragility—"

Later he was led to the Empress through marble corridors. Brightly costumed sentinels stood at every intersection, their eyes cold and impersonal as he cut through their rigid stare. The Imperial Palace was awe-inspiring—a place, he could see, where extravagant claims must be substantiated down to the finest point—a place of no excuses for failure. For the first time Kempelen felt a real sympathy for Pierre's apprehensions. He was still confident, however, when he stood straight and dignified before Her Majesty Maria Theresa.

"Considerable time has elapsed since you were sent for, Monsieur," she began. "Surely a more expeditious route could have been managed for a journey so important." The black eagle of the Hapsburg arms, tiled into the wall above her head, eyed Kempelen with equally arrogant disapproval.

"If Her Majesty would permit an explanation—"

"My roads?" Her Majesty was very touchy on this subject. "My roads should not have retarded you, surely, Monsieur, accustomed as you must be to those of France."

"Her Majesty's roads are excellent," Kempelen lied, discreetly ignoring this dig at his homeland. "It was not the excellent roads that caused my tardiness, but certain alterations I felt it necessary to perform, before I could submit the automaton for her approval."

"Alterations?"

"Her Majesty's prowess at chess is common talk. I therefore thought it imperative she be confronted with an opponent worthy of that excellence. The adjustments were for the purpose of increasing the skill of the automaton."

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The Empress frowned. "Come, come, Monsieur. I see that your opinion of my intellect is not a flattering one. It follows, of course, that your pretty excuse is not."

"But I assure Her Majesty," Kempelen hurried to explain, alarmed at the trend of the interview. "I had no intention of flattering. I was persuaded as to Her Majesty's skill at the game of chess and respectfully adopted the opinion that should she vanquish my Turk forthwith, it would contribute no more to her entertainment than it would to my reputation."

Maria Theresa continued to stare coldly and Kempelen waited for the eagle above to descend like a black thunderbolt upon his head. Through the window at her left he could see the city, with the tower of St. Stephen's Cathedral in the distance. "I dislike such ingenuity," she finally said bluntly. "It is one of the things I abhor about the French."

"If Her Majesty would allow me—" Kempelen began again, but she waved a dismissing hand. "Be prepared to present this wonder of yours promptly at eight o'clock," she ordered.

The mechanician resigned himself to this rude treatment and withdrew. "I'm not *so* lacking in finesse," he excused himself, on his way back to his Turk. "She's got that Worousky on her mind and has no time for politeness. But then—the woman's notoriously persistent; it's twenty years since she lost Silesia but she'd still marry the Devil to get the province back." He would have liked time to visit his old friend Dr. Osloff, before the evening's exhibition. The Viennese surgeon would have sympathized with his discomfort; Osloff had no sympathy to spare for the Empress—his secret cellar-room, it was passed around judiciously, had occasionally harbored more than sprouting potatoes.

At eight o'clock the decorated doors were thrown wide and the Empress, with several friends and court attendants, came into the large room that had been assigned to the evening's diversion.

"Where is this formidable opponent?" she called out mockingly.

The Mechanical Turk sat waiting for her behind the large cabinet he was attached to, the chess board before him. His fiery eyes, under the magnificent turban, seemed full of hate and evil defiance. His arrogant dignity, augmented by the splendor of the embroidered cloak that flowed from his broad shoulders, outdid her own haughtiness; his arm, resting on the cushion, seemed ready to rise, to point a challenging, jeweled finger. The torso stood, in what seemed stubborn immutability, on the far half of the wide cabinet. The large case which had carried this imposing machine to Vienna, stood empty against a wall.

"Well!" the Empress exclaimed, plainly impressed. "Your Turk is ferocious, Monsieur. Let us proceed; I am anxious to test this Tartar."

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"Your Majesty," Kempelen announced. "Before we begin I would like permission to demonstrate to Her Majesty's satisfaction that neither the figure she sees before her, nor the cabinet beneath it, contains anything but the complicated and extremely delicate machinery that controls its movements."

He proceeded to do this, unaided—his assistant, as usual, had previously retired from sight. Throwing open the front and back doors of the cabinet he supervised a close examination and made obvious to everyone that all was what he claimed—an honest conglomeration of mechanism. Then he wound it up with a large key and Maria Theresa moved to the chair before the Turk, the chess board between them.

The game began.

The Turk, when playing, used his left arm like a miniature crane, moving the chess pieces from one square on the board to another, its movements either at right angles or horizontal to the board. The sound of moving clockwork accompanied each operation; between plays, the arm remained quiet upon the cushion.

The group watched in silence as the game went on, confident that this monster was in for a drubbing. Soon, however, some uneasiness could be noticed among them. Her Majesty was showing signs of nervousness. The Turk, it could be seen, was more than holding his own and not inclined to any generosity—neither out of respect for Her Majesty's imperialness, nor out of gallantry to her sex. Three solemn nods of the mechanical head signified "Check" to her king—as the audience had been preinformed. Shortly afterward she lost a bishop. Then a knight.

Maria Theresa, it seemed to those watching, was fighting her Austrian wars all over again. The peace-loving Buddhists who, allegedly, invented chess to be used instead of bloody battle, could have shown no more singleness of purpose than what now seemed to be asked of her—if she would rout this rude Turk.

It was near the end of a game that the Empress was doomed to lose that the automaton suddenly struck the cushion an angry blow with his arm, then took back a chess man she had just moved and replaced it on the square she had taken it from. Apparently the Archduchess of Austria had tried to cheat.

"What's this?" she demanded angrily. She repeated the same move with emphasis, then, raising her chin, glared into the red eyes in indignant defiance.

A violent thing happened next. With a sudden lift of the right arm the Turk upset the board into Maria Theresa's lap. Following that, the sound of moving clockwork stopped and the whole apparatus went dead—implying some failure of its works and an end to the game.

Kempelen stepped forward hur-

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riedly. "Will Her Majesty accept my most contrite apologies? Some mishap has occurred. A broken cog, no doubt—perhaps the result of a defective spring that has snapped out of its place—"

The Empress had risen in sudden calm dignity. She stood looking at the Turk for some moments before replying. "Or perhaps merely a display of temperament, Monsieur," she said. "Shall we be favored with another glimpse into the inside of our monster?"

"Most certainly," the pale Kempelen agreed. "However, it is not my desire to weary Her Majesty with a repetition—"

The Empress smiled. "We shall not be wearied," she replied in a light tone.

Kempelen unlocked both the front and back doors of the cabinet and threw them wide, inviting, as before, the most scrupulous inspection of the machine's interior. The spectators saw at once that one third of the box was filled with cogs, wheels, pulleys, cylinders, and springs. With the rear doors open and the Turk's long cloak lifted, they could look right through the cabinet. Kempelen revolved it on its casters so that all sides could be seen. Relocking the doors, he then allowed the figure itself to be examined through a small door that was opened in the Turk's breast. Two small clockwork units could be seen within, one on each side. That was all.

"It appears genuine enough," the Empress conceded at last. "*Were* it possible to conceal a living being in this Tartar of yours, I should be even less satisfied. To be outgeneraled by a child—the dimensions would permit nothing more—would be most mortifying."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Kempelen bowed low. "I am happy Her Majesty is now at ease about the matter and is convinced that my invention is simply what I claim it to be—purely an automaton."

"Quite," she agreed. Her Majesty now seemed in good spirits. "Pray accept my congratulations, Monsieur, on your ingenuity—"

Kempelen bowed again.

"—and mention the value you set upon your Turk," she finished.

"I beg your Majesty's pardon?"

Maria Theresa raised her eyebrows, as if in astonishment. "The *price,* Monsieur! It is my desire to purchase this incredible mechanism."

"But—" Kempelen took a breath. "I hope that Her Majesty understands, but I cannot possibly part with the automaton. Further commitments prohibit such a course—"

"You may include in the valuation you set upon your machine," the Empress explained patiently, "any sums you will lose as a result of your unfulfilled engagements. Moreover, you have my permission to fashion a duplicate of my machine."

"I respectfully submit," Kempelen argued, "that such a task would take many months to accomplish. Meanwhile, my commitments—"

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"Your *commitments,*" the Empress repeated, somewhat mockingly. "I understand the word. But pray inform these people that Her Majesty has done you the honor of purchasing your machine. That should be excuse enough. Come, Monsieur—I am waiting."

"I respectfully submit," Kempelen repeated doggedly, "that it is *because* of this excessive time involved—if I should ever attempt to build another machine—together with the extreme doubtfulness of my ever really duplicating the original—it is because of these things that any price I might set upon my Turk could not seem less than exorbitant to Her Majesty."

"That is for Her Majesty to judge," the Empress said.

Kempelen steadied himself. "Then—if Her Majesty insists—the price of my machine would have to be—" The sum he mentioned seemed to him more than enough to buy back the long-regretted province of Silesia.

The Empress gasped, then straightened in her chair. "The sum is high, Monsieur, but you are dealing with Austria. If the mechanical man possesses such value, there is only one proper place for it—here, in the Hofberg. You shall receive such a sum in the morning."

She rose and the others hastened to stand up. Kempelen was as unmoving as his Turk, his eyes half shut. "Thank you, Your Majesty," he murmured. Then he added, much louder—because the words leaped from his lips as a speedy afterthought—"I shall notify *His* Majesty that my appearance in Paris must be indefinitely postponed."

"Notify Louis—?" Her attention returned at once. Kempelen watched her closely; the brief announcement should start a chain of reasoning in Maria Theresa's mind. France's moronic Louis XVI could be disagreeable when crossed. If interfered with, his childlike mind delighted in breaking locks and clocks, or anything of a mechanical nature. What a challenge, she would be thinking, this boxful of wheels and springs would hold for a tinkerer like Louis! She had learned long ago the penalty for offending so valuable an ally. Even marrying off her daughter Marie Antoinette to Louis had not put him on the safe side.

It did not take her long.

"On second thought," she announced unblushingly, "I shall release you from a contract that I think, Monsieur, you entered into precipitately." The Empress moved toward the door, hesitated, then turned back.

"By the way, Monsieur, did I not understand you were accompanied by an assistant?"

Kempelen had started toward the Turk. At Maria Theresa's words he hesitated and almost lost his balance. He swung around, straightened, and stood at attention. "Yes, Your Majesty," he replied in a low voice, appalled at the possibility of further

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delay, "a boy—an apprentice mechanician, who has proved quite valuable to me."

The Empress glanced around the room. "He is nowhere in sight?"

"He is a young man," Kempelen said, "of an exceedingly shy and modest nature. Out of consideration for the discomfort he is subject to in the presence of his superiors, I allowed him to retire during the demonstration."

"Retire? Where? Is he here? Come, Monsieur, we would look upon this jewel. A shy youth is a rarity in Vienna—"

Kempelen sighed inaudibly, resigning himself to the tedious persistence of this exacting woman. "Come out, Pierre—" he ordered.

After a moment's wait the curtains which closed off the small alcove at the far end of the room parted. Pierre stood, awkward and embarrassed, his eyes cast down to the floor.

She regarded the youth with little sympathy. "The boy would do well to study means of overcoming such a deficiency," she said. "Good night, Monsieur."

"Lock the doors, Pierre," Kempelen ordered the moment they had closed. He waited until this had been done, then moved with suddenly released impatience to the rear of the Turk and throwing aside the long cloak, opened a secret door, exposing the interior. "You have an unbridled temper, my friend!" Kempelen said sharply to the cripple within. "Surely your wits know something more than chess!"

The man turned his head, grinned sheepishly, then dropped from sight—smoothly lowering his legless torso to the empty compartment below. He did it with the agility of an ape, as if much practice had gone into the movement.

"It might have been wiser to have let him rot in Osloff's cellar," Kempelen continued to Pierre, as he bent and unlocked the rear doors to let the other out, "before ever consenting to smuggle him out of the country. Did the Doctor so misuse his scalpel, M. Worousky, that you would betray your benefactor?"

"Come, come, Monsieur!" Worousky said good-naturedly, emerging like a dwarf from the cabinet. "Such a victory should not be tarnished by ignoble reproof. A little assistance, if you please—my breath comes much easier in your traveling coffin."

They lifted the impudent Worousky into the padded chest. He looked up at them. "Congratulations to Monsieur," he grinned. "As Her Haughtiness remarked, he is, indeed, ingenious. Our Sultan, of course, deserves a little credit, too." He threw a sly glance to the stoical figure at the cabinet. "He should have a fine, tall feather for his cap—don't you think? I shall insist on it!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RAY CHESSON**

TITLE: ***You Can't Run Away***

TYPE: Manhunt

LOCALE: Southwest United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *About two teen-age hoodlums on the lam, one of them a pure sadist, and how their getaway affected the lives of a waitress, a storekeeper, a mechanic, a sheriff and his deputies, and a young couple from Louisiana on their way to a Las Vegas divorce . . .*

ONE OF THE TWO BOYS, THE ONE with the blood on his shoes, was obviously of Latin-American descent, perhaps sixteen years old and small for his age. He had delicate, expressive hands and black curly hair and his eyes were dark and liquid and deceptively innocent.

Relaxed now in the soft luxury of the stolen car, he sat far over against the right door, hearing the even sigh of the tires against the road, feeling the warm night wind on his face. He said to his companion, "First chance I get I ought to clean off these shoes."

The larger, older boy, who was driving, said, "There wasn't any need to stomp that fellow. Some day you're going to kill a man."

The smaller boy lifted his feet and examined his shoes in the faint glow of the dash. They were tan shoes, carefully polished, with inch-thick soles and iron-capped heels. "Sure," he said. "Some day."

It was the black hour before dawn and the car was thrumming through the desert on highway 66, one hundred and ten miles south of Las Vegas, Nevada, seven miles south of Kingman, Arizona, angling west toward the California line. The car was a late model Mercury and it

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overtook and passed a somewhat aged Pontiac with a Louisiana license, cutting in sharply and pulling away fast.

The smaller boy said, "That Pontiac's a long ways from home."

The driver noodded without interest. He was an attractive youth with light hair and blue eyes and the grown body of a man. He might have been eighteen years old. He took one hand from the wheel, fumbled in his shirt pocket, then held the empty hand out toward the other boy. "Cigarette me," he said.

"Like hell," the smaller boy objected. "I only got one left."

The driver kept his eyes on the road. "Cigarette me," he repeated arrogantly, snapping his fingers. And when he had the cigarette he drove silently on into the black hour.

Thirty miles later a yellow neon sign appeared beside the highway. The sign carried one word, *EAT,* suspended above the door of a small, isolated restaurant.

Nearing the sign the Mercury commenced to slow down, turned around a hundred yards past, and crept back without lights. Stopping in front of the restaurant the boys sat a moment studying the interior through the window. There were no customers. The waitress was alone.

"All right," the driver decided, "we'll take it."

The smaller boy was doubtful. "Knock it over?"

"Why not?"

"What if that Pontiac pulls in?"

"We'll be gone by then," the driver said. "Unless you stick around to stomp the waitress."

He loosened the heavy bulk of the revolver in his waistband. "Come on," he said, "let's hit it." And the two boys got out of the car and walked toward the door, their shirts hanging outside their jeans, the gun hidden from view.

When they entered the restaurant the waitress was adjusting an air cooler at the back of the room. She said without looking around, "Just take a seat, please. I'll be with you in a minute."

But when she had finished with the cooler and turned, a professional smile on her full, pleasant face, the boys were still standing.

She said, "I'm sorry but the cook's gone to bed. I can fix something on the grill—ham and eggs or . . ." and her voice faded with a first quick premonition of trouble.

The smaller boy was standing just inside the front door. The older boy walked the length of the room, between the counter and the tables, and stopped beside the back door.

The waitress continued in a tentative, hopeful voice: ". . . or a steak. I could fry you some steaks."

She was a big woman with a softly rounded body, a surprisingly small waist, and heavy, well formed legs. She was thirty-three but she suddenly looked much older. She went on, "Or maybe you'd like some hot cakes."

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The older boy asked, "Where does the cook sleep?"

"The cook owns the restaurant," she said nervously, irrelevantly.

"I asked where does the cook sleep?"

She gave a mute little nod as though to reassure him that she actually did understand the question even though she hadn't yet answered it. She moistened her lips, nodded again, and her bleached, carefully curled hair bobbed in the light of the neon tube that hung over the counter; her earrings sparkled prettily.

The rings were matched agate in a half moon design. She herself had found the rock from which they were cut—found it one winter afternoon while walking with a Santa Fe brakeman in the Calico Mountains near Barstow. And thereafter she wore the earrings because they held memories of a lost day of dreams and empty promises, and the fading rumble of a Diesel train faint on the desert wind.

"Out back," she said finally. "The cook and his wife sleep in a trailer out back."

There was a long moment of waiting, a moment when all small sounds were magnified and the wings of the night hawks rustled loudly as they swooped to catch insects outside the window.

The smaller boy shifted his eyes from the waitress to his companion and then back to the waitress. He lifted his hands, carefully shaped his hair, then reached out and plucked a cricket from the door frame and methodically picked it to pieces. "Lights," he said in a low voice. "Car on the highway."

The lights blossomed slowly in the sagebrush and cholla cactus across the road and then they were close and bright and swinging in an arc to creep up and stare briefly through the window before blinking out.

The smaller boy dropped the cricket and wiped his fingers on his jeans. "It's that Pontiac," he said.

His companion stepped quickly toward the front of the restaurant and the waitress was suddenly alone in the room. She was leaning weakly against the cooler when a man and woman entered. She moved mechanically toward the counter to draw water for her customers, but she didn't mention the trouble with the boys.

She was afraid the man and woman might be alarmed and leave, and then she'd be alone again.

The man coming through the door paused to look back and out into the darkness. He was a man of average height, carefully dressed, somewhere in his late thirties. His name was J. Alton Smith. After a moment he followed the woman to a table.

"Well," he said, standing, smoothing the travel wrinkles from his clothes, "that's certainly an odd thing to do."

"What?" The woman, already seated, was reaching for the menu.

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"What have I done wrong this time?"

"I mean those fellows who just left. They drove off without lights."

"Oh." She picked up the menu, glancing at it indifferently. She was a very tall young woman, at least twelve years younger than the man. She said, "I'm really not at all hungry."

"It's the heat," Smith said. He nodded to the hovering waitress, removed his coat and loosened his collar. He hung the coat carefully over the back of his chair and sat down. "You should eat a little, anyhow."

"Toast then," the young woman said. "Just toast and coffee . . . by way of celebration."

"Celebration?"

"My final breakfast with my husband."

Smith pretended not to hear. But when he had ordered and the waitress was gone he said, "It isn't good taste, Leola, to make a public . . ."

"I know," she interrupted, "but good taste isn't numbered among my few virtues."

They waited, then ate in silence, and when they left the restaurant they drove away in the first ghost glow of dawn. They had gone only a few hundred yards when Smith said, "That dark shape off there in the sagebrush, isn't that a car?"

Unsure, Leola looked back after they had passed.

"Yes," she said. "It's out on the road now, and it's going back toward the restaurant. It hasn't any lights."

They drove on, dismissing the incident, deep in their own problems, rimming the long sweep of the Sacramento wash, sloping gradually toward the distant Colorado River.

Leola said, "Jay . . ."

He glanced at her, quickly, surreptitiously. "Yes?"

"I suppose you must know why I came with you."

In the growing light, barrel cactus and catclaw took form beside the highway, and mesquite and palo verde faded back to where the Black Mountains squatted against the paling sky.

She said, "I had hoped I could influence you to change your mind."

When he didn't answer she said, "But everything I've done has been wrong, because I was hurt and vindictive."

He twisted uncomfortably. "There should be a place called Topock just before we reach the river."

"You might forget me," she said, "but you'll remember little Butch as long as you live."

He leaned forward to check the fuel gauge with exaggerated care.

She said, "You'll remember the sound of his feet running to the door to meet you. And the sound of his voice telling you all about the adventures that filled his little day."

And suddenly ahead, between the foothills, there was the first steely glint of the river.

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"Telling how he chased the raggedy-eared cat through the patio and tripped on the flagstones and skinned his knee. Begging you to take him fishing in the park on Sunday."

Now the Santa Fe tracks crept in to parallel the highway, and the distant, gaunt forms of the highway bridge and the railroad bridge crossed into California together.

She said, "No matter how this trouble began, Jay, it wasn't Butch's fault. And a little boy is lost without a daddy."

He stared stiffly ahead and she became embarrassed, ashamed of her importunities, and spoke in sharp, defensive anger. "Perhaps you will realize some day, Mr. Smith, that there are things in life much bigger than your own small, misguided pride."

Several low buildings took form beside the highway.

"This must be Topock," Smith said. "If there's a service station open I'd better stop for gas."

He was out of the foothills and on the level approach to the bridge. A trailer truck thundered off the bridge toward him, its lights pale moons in the brightening day. Beside the highway he could see a group of tourist cabins, a small store with darkened windows, and two gasoline pumps. He was already passing the store when he saw the white man unlocking the pumps, and the three Indians leaning against the store front.

He was abreast of the truck when he glanced up at the mirror and saw the other car coming out of the hills. There should have been ample time and so he touched his brake, planning to turn back on the wide expanse of gravel that lay between the highway and the railroad. He had barely started the turn when he heard the squeal of tires behind him. He was halfway into the turn when he was hit.

Spinning violently in a shower of gravel and dust, the Pontiac came to rest, still upright. Partway up the steep railroad embankment the other car tilted on its side, one front wheel revolving lazily. Two figures climbed out, skidded down the embankment, and commenced to run, veering left and into a side road that led through the Sante Fe underpass toward the river.

Uninjured, the Smiths got out of their car, looking about them in helpless surprise. They saw the storekeeper approach, heard him say, "Wow! Was that Mercury traveling!"

They watched the truck driver slide ponderously out of his cab fifty yards up the highway and trot back to the scene of the accident, hairy arms flapping, the great bulk of his stomach bouncing loosely over his belt, and calling out in a high voice, "Anybody hurt?"

They walked around their car, looking at the battered fender, the crushed front wheel, not yet able to accept their misfortune.

It was now very light and far to

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the east a morning cloudbank rested on the Hualpais Mountains where the giant saguaro cactus grew, and the sun reached up from behind the mountains and painted the thin edge of the clouds and it was like the yellow neon tubing that had glowed over the door of the little, isolated restaurant.

And remembering the restaurant, Smith said, "I've seen the boys in that Mercury before. They were at that place where we stopped for breakfast a few miles back."

"I think it's the car that was hiding in the sagebrush," Leola said.

The storekeeper was interested. He said to the truck driver, "Beefy, when you pass that place you'd better pull in and see if everything's okay. There's a waitress works there alone at night."

"I'm here to tell you!" The truck driver nodded vigorously with quivering jowls. "Them boys must have done something, to cut and run like they did." With a fine show of concern he trotted abruptly off to his truck.

A tall, angular man had come sleepily out of a garage behind the store. He surveyed the accident, yawning widely, running fingers through his uncombed hair.

"Mechanic," the storekeeper explained to Smith. "Hasn't had a job in a week. He's going to love you for this."

The mechanic walked leisurely to the car on the railroad embankment. He examined it briefly, then came over to the Pontiac, reached in, turned the lights off, and got down on his knees to check the damage.

He got up, yawned again, and started to button his shirt. "Knuckle arm's gone," he said, "king bolt and spindle. I can put her on the road by the middle of the afternoon."

"All right," Smith told him.

"Forty-five dollars in advance," the mechanic said. "Got to buy the parts in Kingman and I'm flat busted."

Smith took out his billfold and counted the money.

Sensing opportunity the storekeeper said, "You folks might as well rent a cabin and get some rest. Number Three's empty."

"Only one?" Smith asked.

"It's got a double bed. How many cabins do you need?"

There was an awkward silence and finally Leola said, "I'm afraid my husband wouldn't consider sleeping with me."

The storekeeper was frankly curious. "He wouldn't?"

"It would be indecent."

"It would?"

"You see," she explained, sorry now that she had spoken but unwilling to stop, "we're on our way to Las Vegas for a divorce."

"It would have been closer to go by way of Boulder City."

"Yes," she agreed, "but my husband took a wrong turn. He appears to be somewhat confused these days."

The storekeeper stroked the black stubble on his chin, spreading his

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fingers to hide his amusement. "Well," he said, "you take Number Three. Your husband can go fishing."

"Sure," the mechanic joined happily in the game. "I'll drive him down to the fishing camp to rent a boat. Two hours on that river today and he'll come ashore ready to sleep with anybody."

Smith had turned a slow, deep red. He asked stiffly, "Could I really get a boat?"

Leola said, "Don't be silly, Mr. Smith," and she turned away and walked toward the cabins—an extremely tall young woman, extremely thin, and surprisingly beautiful.

When she was gone the storekeeper said, "We'd better call the Sheriff's Office and report those boys."

The three men walked together to the store, passing the Indians who still leaned undisturbed against the front of the building.

In sudden recall the mechanic said, "Hey, wait a minute! What boys? Who was in that other car?"

"Didn't get acquainted," the storekeeper answered. "They lit out through the underpass. Maybe they're going fishing too."

The mechanic took a coin from his pocket. "Hell's going to pop around here today," he predicted. He flipped the coin in the air. "Match you for a beer."

"Double or nothing," the storekeeper said.

In silent hope the Indians followed the white men into the store. It was always possible there might be a round on the house.

The Sheriff's Office was in Kingman—an austere room in the courthouse, facing out across a narrow walk toward the county jail. During the night the deputy on duty, a man called Big Boy, had received an All Points Bulletin from Nevada. Two juvenile gunmen had robbed and stomped a service station attendant near Las Vegas. The fugitives were driving a late model Mercury with an Oregon license and were last seen speeding south on the Boulder City highway toward Arizona. This was shortly after midnight.

Alerted by Big Boy, the sheriff with the deputy from Gold Road and the deputy from Yucca had established a roadblock near the checking station north of Kingman.

As the night waned it became increasingly doubtful that there would be any action on the Boulder road and when the highway patrol took over the roadblock in the first gray moments of dawn the sheriff brought his men back to Kingman. Now, hungry and tired, they gathered in the office with Big Boy.

The sheriff said, "Was there any follow-up on that APB from Nevada?"

Big Boy leaned forward in his chair, reached a blunt, massive hand across the desk and picked up a clipboard. He handed the clipboard to the sheriff.

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Standing against the counter at the front of the office, the Gold Road deputy asked in his soft, pleasant voice, "Haven't you even got a pot of coffee in this place, Big Boy?"

"My wife won't let me drink coffee," Big Boy said.

The Yucca deputy was sitting in a chair against the wall. He was the oldest of the four men, florid of countenance and slightly overweight. He asked, "Don't you have anything to eat? Any leftover pork chops, maybe?"

"My wife won't let me eat pork chops," Big Boy said.

The Yucca deputy clucked in ready sympathy. "What does she feed you on?" he wondered.

"Evaporated milk, peanut butter, and crackers." Big Boy shifted his two hundred and fifty pounds and looked at his fellow officers. His eyes were merry blue slits in the tremendous granite block of his face. "Sometimes," he said, "I think my ulcers hurt my wife worse than they hurt me."

The sheriff had finished with the clipboard. He sat on a corner of the desk, lighting a cigarette. "There's one way those boys could have slipped into Arizona in this area."

"Davis Dam," Big Boy said.

The sheriff nodded. He was a youngish man with an athletic build and a cool, competent bearing. "Davis Dam through Bullhead City and up the dirt road to Oatman. From there they could have hit 66 without being intercepted."

"It isn't likely," the Yucca deputy said. "The APB put them on this side of the turnoff at Railroad Pass."

"They might have slipped back," the sheriff said.

There was a silence broken suddenly by the telephone. The sheriff picked it up and listened with no change of expression, pulling gently at his cigarette. "Thanks," he said presently. "We'll be there as soon as possible."

He replaced the phone and it immediately rang again. "Sheriff's Office," he said, and the deputies strained forward to catch the thin metallic sounds that came over the wire. "Okay, Beefy," the sheriff said, "you bring her along to the hospital in your truck."

Replacing the phone the second time, he watched it closely, as though wondering if it might convey even more bad news. "Well," he said, "our boys are here."

The deputies waited while the sheriff ground out his cigarette.

"They got on 66, knocked off the Catclaw Restaurant, tied and gagged the waitress and ripped one of her ears trying to take her earrings. From the Catclaw they headed west and in Topock they crashed a car belonging to a man named Smith. Right now they're afoot along the river near the fishing camp."

Big Boy pulled open a desk drawer, took out a small can of milk, and slipped it into his pocket. He took a handful of crackers and care-

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fully wrapped them in a piece of newspaper, putting them in the pocket with the milk. He pushed his chair back and got to his feet, a tremendous man now approaching middle-age, still carrying his six feet four inches with the erectness of youth. He said, "You'll want me to do the tracking, won't you?"

The sheriff nodded.

"You going to fly over and pin them down?"

"As soon as I can rouse a pilot."

"Call my wife, will you, and tell her I won't be home for breakfast."

"I'll call her. And Big Boy . . ."

"Yeah?"

". . . this time try to keep at least one of the men to cover you . . ."

"Sure."

". . . because you're too damn heavy for us to pack out if you go and get yourself shot."

"Just bury me where I fall," Big Boy said, grinning, "along with my ulcers and crackers and evaporated milk."

He left the office with the two smaller deputies and they walked quickly past the jail to the patrol car. Getting in under the wheel, Big Boy started the engine while the Gold Road deputy got in beside him and the Yucca deputy climbed in the back. Pulling away from the courthouse the car picked up speed, its siren shattering the early quiet of the slumbering streets. At the edge of town the siren stopped and the desert rushed forward in the first long slant of the morning sun.

The Yucca deputy leaned forward and asked, "What was the sheriff reading on the clipboard?"

"10-29 from Vegas," Big Boy said. "The stickup car was stolen in Bakersfield by a couple of kids named Gonzales and Kelly."

"Know what kind of gun they're using?"

"An old Colt .44-40."

"That's a lot of gun for two kids named Gonzales and Kelly," the deputy from Yucca said.

When the sun first appeared over the Hualpais, Gonzales and Kelly were a hundred yards beyond the fishing camp and resting in the shelter of a mesquite beside the road. Unhurt in the accident and now recovered from the initial shock, they were trying to plan their way out of a near hopeless situation.

Kelly said, "We haven't got much time. In another thirty minutes this place will be lousy with cops."

"There's a car parked back there by that camp," Gonzales suggested.

"Hell," Kelly said. "We take a car and they'll block every road in this part of the country."

"We got through last night," Gonzales pointed out.

"That's because we took a dirt cutoff. We couldn't get away with it again."

They huddled under the low branches of the mesquite, staring at each other, their minds searching frantically for some avenue of escape. In the sagebrush around them, Gam-

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bels quail greeted the sun with cheerful voices and Inca doves called mournfully from the pale blue smoke trees in the wash across the road.

Gonzales said, "We could head for that bunch of dark mountains." He motioned vaguely toward the Black Range many miles to the northeast. "They'd never find us up there."

"They wouldn't have to find us up there," Kelly told him. "We'd be dead. We probably wouldn't even live to get there."

"Why?"

Kelly snorted with exasperation. "You're not in Bakersfield now, Gonzales. You start out across those alluvial fans and you get thirsty, you can't walk in a drug store and say give me a coke. And we haven't even got any hats."

Kelly got up and looked around. Already the sun, filtering through the thin foliage of the mesquite, was like the touch of hot metal. He said, "We'll swing off through the brush and circle to the fishing camp. Maybe we can steal a boat and hide in the tules out near the sandbar."

Gonzales said, "You got a gun, man. Why not just walk up and take a boat?"

"If we steal it," Kelly explained with mounting impatience, "maybe they won't miss it and they won't know we're out there in the tules. And anyhow we've got enough chalked up against us already. Stick up that camp and you won't leave until you've stomped all the men and pulled the ears off the women."

"I thought the earrings just screwed up tight," Gonzales said. "I didn't know they went all the way through her ears. Besides, they were pretty," he added. "I thought I'd take them for mom."

"Yeah," Kelly said, "you thought. You're a real high-powered thinker, Gonzales." He got up and moved off through the sagebrush, walking in a half crouch.

Following in his wake Gonzales whispered softly to himself, "If I had the gun you wouldn't talk to me like that, Mr. Kelly." He said aloud, "Hey, Kelly . . ."

"What?"

"You ever hear from your old man?"

"No."

"I suppose your uncle wouldn't give you a letter even if your old man sent you one."

No reply.

"I suppose your uncle still holds it against your old man for what your mom did to herself."

Kelly plunged on toward the camp and Gonzales followed in silence, content with the knowledge that he had touched an unhealed wound. After a while they came to the edge of the sagebrush.

Here a narrow slough separated them from the camp, which was a low structure of wood and corrugated iron, a combination tackle shop and living quarters for the owners. The two boys squatted behind a screen of tules, watching the camp, listening to movement and voices there.

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Kelly said, "They're probably eating breakfast. I don't think they'll notice us."

He crept along the edge of the slough, away from the camp, Gonzales crawling at his heels. In the tules mudhens splashed away in noisy fright and out in the sagebrush the quail stopped talking.

About fifty yards from the camp the slough opened into a wide bay that reached out to the distant sandbar beyond which the river boiled south beneath the bridges, past Topock, and on into the bare, brutal mountains. Directly across the slough a dozen fishing skiffs were tied up at a small dock. Several outboard motors stood in a rack at one end of the dock.

Kelly said, "We won't need a motor. Just oars."

Gonzales asked, "How we going to get to the boats?"

"Swim."

Gonzales looked at the dark water. Black feathers from the mudhens floated motionless on its surface. "Not me," he decided. "I'm a lousy swimmer."

"It's no more than a hundred feet," Kelly spoke in open contempt.

"Or else what?"

"Or else you can stay here and wait for the cops," Kelly said. He stepped out onto the slough and the mud sucked heavily at his feet.

Gonzales called softly after him, "You leave me here and I'll sure as hell tell the cops where you went."

From the camp came a sharp clatter of dishes and a woman's voice raised in annoyance and a man's voice answering with laughter. Far over the water a pickup came through the underpass at Topock, backfiring on the downgrade, leveling off and speeding along the road that went by the camp.

Kelly said, "Just stay where you are and I'll come back with the boat and get you."

He took another step and now he was beyond all concealment and standing in the flat, quiet water looking nervously toward the camp.

Gonzales said, "You better leave the gun with me."

He waded into the slough, reaching his hand toward Kelly. "You'll get it wet," he said. "You might even lose it."

Kelly was reluctant. He pulled the gun from his waistband and held it a moment in indecision. Then he gave it to Gonzales. He turned to look again at the camp. "Get ashore, Gonzales!" he cried in sudden panic. "That pickup's turning in!"

They floundered in the thick, sucking mud while the pickup stopped beside the camp and two men got out and watched them. They saw the men hurry into the building. The boys had gained the shore and were running through the sagebrush toward a shelter of mesquite when the two men emerged from the building followed by a third man and then a woman. They had just reached the mesquite when they heard the rifle; a bullet whipped

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through the branches above them and whined away over the desert. They were still running when they crossed the road and fled up the wash through the smoke trees. They finally dropped, exhausted, in the shade of a clump of greasewood at the bottom of the railroad embankment a mile to the east of the camp.

After he had rested a few minutes, Gonzales sat up and commenced to polish the gun on the front of his shirt. He said, "It was that man with the Louisiana car. He was one of the men got out of the pickup."

He rubbed viciously at the long, heavy barrel. Behind expressionless eyes his mind festered with an irrational, animal anger. He said, "That man from Louisiana's caused all our trouble. And then he went and shot at us."

"We don't know who it was shot at us," Kelly told him.

Gonzales continued to polish the gun.

Kelly said, "You can give that thing back to me now."

Gonzales ignored the order.

"I said give me that gun," Kelly repeated.

Gonzales rested the gun on his knee, the barrel pointing at Kelly's face. He said, "I'm going to keep it."

They sat a few feet apart, watching each other in hostile silence.

Finally Kelly asked, "What do you intend to do with it?"

"If I get a chance," Gonzales said, "I'll kill that man from Louisiana."

Kelly stared at the black emptiness of the threatening muzzle. He discarded all thought of trying to take the gun by force. With an air of resignation he stood up and looked back toward the camp. "I wish we'd remembered to get some cigarettes when we hit that restaurant," he said, and started up the steep slope to the railroad. Gonzales climbed to his feet and followed.

Crossing the tracks they moved rapidly through the low hills beyond and then across the highway and into the foothills below Topock. They were following a canyon down to the river when they first heard the sheriff's plane. They knew the plane was circling near the fishing camp and they guessed its purpose, but hidden from view by the upthrust of the canyon wall they felt safe, confident that they had outwitted their pursuers. When they came to the river they waded in and drank thirstily, then pushed out through the waist-deep water to a dead mesquite that stood in a growth of tules a few yards from shore. In the shelter of the tules they leaned against the tree, buoyed by the cool, swift current.

Now, with the tules pulled overhead to form a canopy against the sun, they rested in the green shade, waiting for night. Peering out through the tules they could see Topock perched on its bluff a scant half mile away. They could see the sheriff's plane far off over the wash. Across the river they saw a prospector leading a burro along a mountain slope. They rested drowsily, un-

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worried, against the mesquite while the brassy sun climbed the pale wall of the sky. And suddenly the bow of a skiff knifed the tules aside and they were standing in the sun and Smith was sitting in the skiff frowning down at them in surprise. There was a brief instant of frightened immobility, then the gun hammer clicked sharply under Gonzales's thumb.

"Move aside, Kelly!" he said. "You're standing in my way . . ."

When Smith first rented the boat he had crossed the bay and cut his motor beside the tules bordering the sandbar.

For a while he fished desultorily, casting a weedless spoon along the edge of the tules, his duck-billed cap pulled low on his forehead—a man of pleasing appearance, hiding a deep-rooted insecurity under a cloak of exaggerated dignity. When the sheriff's plane sloped over the Black Mountains he reeled in and watched with detached interest.

And so he drifted, immersed in his own unhappiness, toward the outlet where the bay poured into the river near the railroad bridge, and through the outlet into the channel and then downriver beneath the two bridges, uncaring, deep in the unsuppressible memory of a recent Sunday morning in New Orleans.

That morning, less than a week past, he awoke unwillingly, regretfully, knowing that consciousness would bring a familiar sense of depression. Alone in the bedroom, he dressed slowly, seeking escape from his thoughts, listening to the muted sounds of the French Quarter, hearing the rustle of banana leaves in the patio outside the window, feeling the quiet movement of his family beyond the bedroom door. When he had finished dressing, he went out into the living room.

"Daddy's awake!"

The shrill voice called joyfully from the kitchen and a small boy came through the door into the living room, moving with quick, mincing steps, thin arms driving like pistons. "Daddy's awake, daddy's awake!"

The little boy was a freight train easing into the Quarter through Elysian Fields—a happy blue-eyed freight train with an unruly mop of red hair and a shoe-button nose. "I'm hauling a load of catfish to the French Market, daddy. Are you going fishing today?"

"I don't know," Smith said. "Maybe."

"Can I go with you?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you're too young."

"Daddy's awake, daddy's awake, daddy's awake!" The words clicked to the cadence of fast moving wheels on shiny rails. "I want to go with you!"

"No, Butch."

"Then," the little boy said, "I'll cry and squall and fall on the floor."

"You do that," his mother spoke

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gaily from the kitchen, "and I'll take a hairbrush and tear up your load of catfish."

"Daddy's awake, daddy's awake!" The five-year-old freight train backed expertly through the front door and coasted away to safety in the patio.

Smith went into the kitchen where his wife sat at the table, a large sketch pad propped against the toaster in front of her.

"Bacon and eggs?" she suggested.

He shook his head. Pouring coffee, he sat down across the table.

She looked at him over the pad, reading his mood. Presently she said, "I've been working this morning."

He sipped his coffee. "Yes?"

"On the pirate drawing. I'll show you."

"Don't bother," he said.

"But I want to."

She held the pad up, turning it for him to see. "Just charcoal," she said. "Do you like the composition?"

"I wouldn't know about compositions," he said.

She refused to be annoyed. She said, "After I clean up the kitchen I'll do a color sketch."

He put his cup down. "Perhaps," he said, "I am holding you up."

They sat with carefully averted eyes while the tension grew.

"Don't spoil it for me, Jay," she said at last.

He looked up. "Could I?"

"There's happiness in painting," she tried to explain. "There's music in color and in the sweep of a line."

"There's also companionship," he suggested.

She ignored the inference. "I've never tried anything this big before," she said. "A mural. An entire wall for a night club."

"A mural for a Bourbon Street clip joint," he corrected.

And when she didn't answer he added, "Done in collaboration with a red-headed genius named Lawrence."

She worked at the drawing, blending tones with her thumb.

"Why," he asked, "does it have to be Lawrence?"

She scrubbed industriously at her thumb, wiping the charcoal smudge off on a piece of chamois. She said, "He was hired by the club, just as I was hired. On the strength of his work." She looked up at her husband. "Lawrence is a good artist."

"Yes," he acknowledged. "I suppose so."

He folded his hands in unconscious withdrawal to a childhood game . . . here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door, and see all the people.

He said, "As for me, I'm only the New Orleans salesman for a Chicago sporting goods manufacturer. Firearms and fishing tackle. I can't compete with genius."

She pushed the drawing aside and stood up. "Jay," she said, "what's wrong with you?"

He retreated to the dark cavern of his bitterness, unwilling to search for an answer.

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She said, "Why do you distrust everybody, everything that touches your life?"

It had started a long time ago—when his parents died. He was seven years old then.

"Our marriage has been a good thing, Jay," she said. "Why must you destroy it?"

Because the good things are never yours to keep, he thought bitterly; you can only use them a little while, until someone takes them away—an artist, perhaps, with red hair.

He said aloud, "I've been offered a transfer to the San Francisco area."

"Yes," she said. "I know. You've been planning to leave me for quite some time."

He drank in embarrassed silence.

She said, "It's your way of life, isn't it Jay? Sooner or later you always leave."

That is a thing you learn when you are seven years old and your parents are dead. You learn to relinquish the coveted toys that belong to your cousins and to move on and live a while in another relative's house. You learn very early that the good things never last.

She said, "You're still clinging to an impossible childhood dream, aren't you? Still looking for the perfect life. Searching for the beauty and the purity."

Exposed, defenseless, he became angry.

"When are you going?" she asked.

"As soon as possible," he said. "Tomorrow."

She moved aimlessly about the kitchen, adjusting the curtains at the window, sticking toothpicks in an avocado seed and setting it to sprout in a glass of water on the windowsill. "All right," she said.

She crossed the kitchen toward the living room, pausing at the door. "But you're wrong about Lawrence. That business ended a long time ago."

And he knew instinctively it was true. But in anger he had committed himself and now he could find no retreat with dignity. He looked down at his folded hands . . . here's the church, here's the steeple . . . He listened to the little boy playing in the patio and was aware of his loss. He searched for a way to recall the things that had been said. But it was too late. Already his wife was at the telephone in the living room, talking with her mother.

When she came back to the kitchen she said, "Mother and dad are coming in for Butch. They'll take him out to their place."

"Their place?" He was puzzled. "Why?"

"Because I'm going with you."

His breath caught in sudden hope.

"I'll go as far as Las Vegas," she said. "I'll get the divorce there."

"Oh." He carefully concealed his disappointment. "But what about the mural?"

"To hell with the mural," she said, and she ripped the drawing from the pad and tore it into small pieces.

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And it happened like that, so quickly, so irrevocably, that Sunday morning in New Orleans less than a week ago. And now she slept in a strange cabin in a little place called Topock, in the Arizona desert, and none of her bright paintings were on the walls . . . . while he drifted on the Colorado in a rented skiff . . . beneath the bridges and fast in the current . . . watching a prospector come down out of the mountains, leading his burro to water . . . seeing a mesquite snag standing dead among the tules . . . guiding the skiff into the tules because it seemed like a good place to think . . .

He was surprised when he saw the two boys.

He stared at the gun in disbelief, hearing the smaller boy's voice: "Move aside, Kelly!"

He heard the larger boy cry out, "Don't shoot him now! Somebody'll hear it!"

Then they were in the boat and he was sitting on the middle seat while the smaller boy crouched in the bow, gun in hand, and the larger boy was in the stern; the motor started and the boat sprang away from the tules and curled with the river into a picture world of canyons and swirling water and desolate, sunbaked mountains.

And straight into the heart of the picture sailed Smith, searching for the beauty and the purity . . . .

The boat had traveled several miles downstream before the sheriff discovered what had happened. He had seen Smith, earlier, drifting toward the outlet and had radioed his ground party for identification. After that he ignored Smith and concentrated on the three deputies in the desert below.

When Big Boy, carrying a portable radio slung from a shoulder strap, flanked by his fellow deputies, crossed the road and began to track the fugitives up the wash, the sheriff said to his pilot, "This job is turning out bigger than I expected."

The pilot, a young crop-duster by profession, yawned widely and searched his pockets for a stick of gum. He said, "What do you think?"

"I think we'd better stop knocking the tops off these smoke trees and get upstairs," the sheriff said. "I think we ought to take a look at the country below Topock."

The desert dropped away and revolved slowly as the light plane banked into a climbing turn. The Santa Fe tracks passed beneath the wings, and then the highway.

The pilot asked, "What's that across the river?"

The sheriff raised his binoculars. "Prospector," he said. "Jumping around, pointing downstream. Looks excited."

"There's a boat down there," the pilot said, "near Devil's Elbow."

"Let's go down and make a pass at it," the sheriff said.

"Anything for kicks," the pilot said, chewing contentedly on his gum.

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A few moments later the sheriff pressed the switch on the transmitter. "Sheriff to Big Boy," he spoke into the microphone. "Do you read me, Big Boy?"

"Go ahead, Sheriff," the deputy's voice answered.

"Gonzales and Kelly are in the river gorge in Smith's boat. They're going ashore and running up a canyon. They're taking Smith with them. I'll circle overhead until you can get here. Over and out."

The pilot lifted the plane through a low saddle in the mountains and climbed above the jagged peaks. He said. "They had a gun on that fellow Smith. It doesn't look good."

"No," the sheriff said, "it doesn't look good."

"How long do you think it'll take Big Boy to get downriver?"

"Maybe noon."

It was slightly past noon when the three deputies arrived in the river gorge. They had picked up a boat at the fishing camp and now they curved in out of the racing flood of the channel, cut their motor, and beached in a quiet cove beside Smith's abandoned skiff.

Walking across a narrow expanse of fine, white sand they stopped in the lacy shade of a mesquite near the entrance to a canyon. Squatting on their heels they looked at the three sets of tracks that led through the sand into the canyon. Then they looked up, following the twisting course of the canyon toward the sentinel peaks. They saw the sheriff's plane wheel lazily against the sky and head away toward the north. After the plane was gone there was no sound except the velvet whisper of the river. Nor was there any movement, any sign of life.

Big Boy said, "It's a hundred and twenty-two in the shade and they ran off and left Smith's thermos jug in the boat. No water. They won't get far."

He stood up and checked his belt canteen. He unsnapped the holster strap that secured his revolver in place. He said, "We ought to have them within an hour."

The Yucca deputy said, "I'll get the radio out of the boat."

"I don't want it," Big Boy said. "I'm leaving it here with you."

"With me? I'm staying?"

"Somebody has to stay in case they circle back."

"Oh." The florid deputy from Yucca sighed with relief. "You're a kind man, officer," he said. "When we get home I'll buy you a box of crackers."

Big Boy turned to the Gold Road deputy. "How's your canteen?"

"Full."

"Then we might as well hit the trail."

"Yeah," the younger man agreed. "Smith will be glad to see us."

They stepped out into the sun, walking abreast, several feet apart, unhurried, moving confidently up the steep, uneven slope of the canyon floor. It was just another job. They

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had done it many times in the past. They saw no reason why the outcome of this particular manhunt should differ from all the others. They climbed on into a hot, silent world of reddish-brown rock and scattered greasewood and barrel cactus. Thirty minutes later, high in the mountains, they captured Kelly.

They heard the boy first—heard his feet scuffing through loose gravel somewhere ahead and above. Then they saw him returning alone down the canyon, his shirt pulled up in the back and over his head, forming a shield against the sun. They waited against the canyon wall, hidden by a thrust of rock, and when he had passed they stepped out behind him.

"Hello, Kelly," Big Boy said.

Kelly stumbled and halted, the shirt sliding down from his head to cover the sunburned flesh of his back. He turned slowly, staring with strange, bright eyes at the officers who watched him, their hands hanging ready besides their holsters.

Big Boy said to his companion, "Now here we have a traveling young heistman who's obviously glad it's all over. Shake him down."

Then to Kelly, "Where's the gun?"

The boy tried to swallow, his lips hanging open. He swayed slightly and shifted his feet for balance. "I don't know. Gun? Gonzales has it."

"Where's Gonzales?"

"Up there." Kelly motioned loosely with his hands. "Way up."

"Is he still holding Smith?"

The boy shuddered, winced, pressed his hands tight against his head. "The man from Louisiana? Yes. He's there."

"What shape is Smith in?" Big Boy asked.

"He's all right. The sun didn't hurt him. He's got a hat."

"Why didn't you take Smith's hat?"

"I don't know. I tried. But Smith was getting sore. He wanted to argue about it."

"Why didn't Gonzales help you?"

"Gonzales didn't care. Gonzales was in the shade. He just sat and watched and kept polishing the gun."

"And so you started back down. Didn't you know we'd be waiting for you?"

"It didn't matter. After the plane found us I knew we wouldn't get away. Can I have some water?"

"In a minute. Tell me what Gonzales intends to do with Smith?"

"I don't know. Shoot him, I suppose."

"Shoot him?"

"Gonzales likes to see things die. Frogs, bugs, anything."

"You don't feel good, do you Kelly?"

"No."

"Headache?"

"Yes."

"Know what's wrong with you?"

"I'm sick."

"Sunstroke. Your eyes won't even focus." Big Boy turned to his fellow deputy. "Give the kid a drink, take him down to the river, dampen his clothes, and put him in the shade."

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"You going to wait here for me?" the younger man asked.

"No. I'll go on up and see what I can do about Smith."

"I'd rather you'd wait," the smaller deputy said. "That bird Gonzales is slipping off his rocker. He'll panic and start shooting."

"I can handle him," Big Boy said.

"You'd better wait," his companion repeated. "I'm getting a feeling about this business. Something's going wrong."

"All right," Big Boy said. "I'll go ahead and track them down and when I find them I'll wait for you."

The Gold Road deputy stood in the canyon and watched Big Boy climb up and disappear among the boulders. He took his canteen off his belt and held it out to Kelly.

"Okay, buster," he said, "let's get a move on"—and the man and the boy started down the canyon, the boy three inches taller than the man, twenty pounds heavier, stumbling weakly, clutching at the deputy's arm for support. They were all the way down to the river when it happened.

Kelly was sitting in the shade of the mesquite, staring at the ground, a dampened handkerchief tied around his head. The Yucca deputy was sitting on his heels in the sand beside the radio. He was saying to the deputy from Gold Road, "I got through to a highway patrol car at Topock. Told them we've got Kelly. They said the sheriff landed on the old road and sent the plane back to Kingman. He's on his way here."

The Gold Road deputy started to answer but whirled suddenly toward the canyon, listening, asking in a sharp voice, "What was that? A .38 or a .44-40?"

And while the faint crash of the gun still echoed from the peaks, the two officers grabbed Kelly, pulled his arms roughly around the trunk of the mesquite, snapped handcuffs on his wrists, and then were running into the canyon and up the slope.

The deputy from Gold Road said, "Damn it all, I told Big Boy to wait for me! I had a feeling that something was going wrong!"

The florid deputy from Yucca, running hard beside him, glanced briefly at his watch and said as though already filling out the report, "It happened at exactly 1:56 . . ."

It was three o'clock when Leola came finally, fully awake. During the morning she had been dimly aware of outside sounds—cars driving away as the cabins were vacated, and the drone of the plane circling over the desert. Now there was only the hum of the air-cooler in the darkened room. She got up and commenced to dress.

Leaving the cabin, she hesitated, momentarily blinded by the brilliance of the sun. She raised a hand to shade her eyes. Under a nearby cottonwood she saw two police officers sitting in a patrol car. She saw a large roadside sign—*Welcome to Arizona*—and beyond the sign, at the foot of a bluff, the river curled away

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into the mountains. Still shading her eyes she walked through the unbelievable heat toward the store.

In the coolness of the store the three Indians sat at the counter drinking beer with a bearded prospector. The prospector was saying, ". . . so I was across the river in California, see, and I didn't know about this fracas going on here in Topock, or who the man in the boat was, see . . ."

He paused, looking around when Leola entered, watching her walk to the far end of the counter to sit on a stool against the wall. He turned back to the Indians. "You men ready for another round?"

The Indians nodded and the prospector called toward a partially open door behind the counter, "Hey, bartender, a little service in here."

And back to the Indians, "So there I was, see, sampling a quartz outcropping in the Chemehuevi Range, see, and I was coming down to fill my canteen at the river and to give my burro a drink." His voice faltered. "Not many burro men left in the hills these days," he said sadly. "All jeep men with Geiger counters."

He shook his head in poignant memory of an older day and commenced to bang his empty beer can on the counter. "Hey, bartender! A little service in here!"

The storekeeper came in and closed the door. He set four frosted cans on the counter and took his money from a small pile of coins in front of the prospector. He punched the cash register and walked down the counter to Leola.

"I was helping the mechanic," he said. "Your car's finished."

"Have you seen my husband?" she asked.

"No." He shifted his eyes, looking out through the front window at the mountains.

"Have they caught the boys yet?"

"One of them."

"Strange about my husband," she said. "It must be terribly hot on the river."

They were silent, and into the silence came the prospector's voice: ". . . so I was looking right at it from across the river, see, and I don't think the boys even knew I was there. Then I saw the smaller boy when he out the gun on the man, and I wouldn't be in that fellow's shoes for all the ore in the Chemehuevi Range. That fisherman. That man they tell me comes from Louisiana."

He stopped talking and the four men tilted their cans toward the ceiling, drinking in unison.

Leola leaned forward and looked down the counter. She turned back to the storekeeper, puzzled. She asked, "What did he say? What was that about a gun and a fisherman from Louisiana?"

The storekeeper hesitated, stirring uncomfortably, and she repeated, "What did he say?" And in a rising voice. "Was he talking about my husband?"

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"Yes," the storekeeper said, "he was talking about your husband."

She shook her head, denying the words.

"Now listen," the storekeeper said, "just take it easy. The boy with the gun took your husband up in the mountains, but the sheriff'll get him out all right."

"In the mountains?" Her mind fought to reject the truth. "No," she said. "No, he won't be all right!"

She dropped her hands to her lap and commenced to rock slowly back and forth on her stool.

"Now listen," the storekeeper said helplessly, "just take it easy."

The prospector watched with open curiosity. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing," the storekeeper said, "until you shot off your stupid mouth."

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you."

The prospector got up. "Now wait a minute!"

"That man you were telling about is this lady's husband. She hadn't heard what happened."

"Oh."

The prospector looked again at Leola. Contrite, unable to think of anything to say, he traced damp patterns on the counter with his beer can. He was a lonely man, spending his life in the hills, and it had pleased him to talk to the Indians. Now the pleasure was gone. He gathered up his coins. "Well," he said, "I better get back across the river. My burro'll be wondering what's keeping me."

He walked to the door. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

He went out into the sun, and after a moment the Indians got up and followed him out.

Leola continued to rock, slowly, rhythmically, hands clenched against her slender thighs. The storekeeper busied himself removing the empty cans from the counter. In the ceiling the fan whirred its endless, drowzy monotone, and above the cash register a bluebottle fly wandered aimlessly across a cardboard sign that said: *In God We Trust; All Others Cash.*

The storekeeper came back and leaned on the counter. "How about a drink?" he offered. "Maybe you could use a beer."

"No."

"Now look," he said, "we'll know if anything happens. There's a highway patrol car standing by with a radio."

She seemed not to hear. She said, "It was all my fault. I embarrassed him, hurt his pride. It was my fault he went out on the river."

"You sure don't act like a woman who's headed for a divorce," the storekeeper said.

"That was my fault, too," she said.

She felt a compulsion to remember, to unburden herself to this stranger with the kind eyes and the dark stubble on his chin. She said, "You see, I have a little boy, but my husband isn't the boy's father . . ."

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"Maybe you ought to talk about something else."

". . . because little Butch was by my first marriage."

"Oh."

"I was very young and I met a boy named Lawrence while I was going to art shool. That was back in New Orleans."

"Never did get to New Orleans," the storekeeper remarked.

"But the marriage didn't last. It was just kid stuff."

"Never did get married myself," the storekeeper sighed.

"So then I found Jay, and he was all I wanted. Only he couldn't seem to believe it. Because I kept running into Lawrence all the time. Artists are always bumping into each other in a small place like the French Quarter."

"I knew an artist once," the storekeeper said, reaching gratefully for any subject, anything to keep her mind occupied.

"And then I started to work on a mural with my first husband, and that was a mistake."

"Fellow came through here once," the storekeeper said. "Bought a picture from him. Three dollars."

"Because after that Jay felt completely alone, left out, unneeded."

"Don't know whatever happened to that picture," the storekeeper went on. "Haven't seen it for a couple of years."

"So the fun went out of our marriage. All the little happy things."

She tilted her head to one side and contorted her face with the seriousness of a child who has made a rare discovery. "Do you know that most of the happy things are just little things? Silly little things? Like the night we walked in the fog and I stumbled against a doorstep, and there was blood on my ankle and I wiped the blood with my finger and dabbed it on the strange door, and it was like a tiny, dark red sun. And we went on, laughing, because we were happy then, and it was good to know that even on the darkest night our own little sun would be shining somewhere in the city."

"Beatin'est fellow I ever saw, that artist," the storekeeper mumbled. "Draw anything. Just like a photograph. And he said he never took a lesson in his life."

There was the loud roar of a motor, and tires spinning in gravel, and the police car flashed past the window and turned toward the underpass. Then the mechanic burst into the store.

"Well," he said, "it's all over." He saw Leola and paused in surprise. He went on to the counter and sat down.

She waited, motionless, anxiety in her posture; but the mechanic only reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

So she asked, "Is . . . did anybody get hurt?"

"Yes." The mechanic glanced at the storekeeper. He struck a match to his cigarette. "Somebody got hurt."

"Killed?" She held her breath.

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"Yes."

She whimpered softly and the storekeeper reached out and touched her shoulder with gentle fingers. "Just take it easy," he implored. "Just take it easy."

"The message didn't come through very good," the mechanic said. "I heard something about your husband and a deputy and a boy named Gonzales, but I really don't know which one got killed. We'll have to wait for the sheriff. He's on his way out now."

"You know," she said in a hopeless voice. "You know who it was."

She commenced to rock again, hands clenching, unclenching. "How could they do it . . . those young boys? Why, they're only children. They should be at home with their parents, waiting for school to open in the fall. How could they do a thing like this?"

Still handcuffed to the mesquite at the canyon's entrance, forehead pressed against the twisted trunk, Kelly was thinking that now, after this final trouble, even his uncle's home, his last refuge, would be always closed against him.

Kelly was thinking of another, earlier, home and how it had disintegrated, taking with it all his young confidence and beliefs . . . thinking too of the empty barbiturate bottle on the table beside the bed where his mother had died during that distant night after his father's conviction . . . thinking of his father's face, so suddenly gray with age, and of the bank where his father had worked through all the good years before the auditors had found the shortage.

Gonzales was sitting on the ground in the upper canyon, looking at the feet of the officers who crowded around him, looking past the feet at the body of the man he had just killed. Gonzales was thinking that all this would be in the papers and that the big pipefitter from Oregon would read about it and now he'd know what had happened to his Mercury.

Gonzales was thinking that the pipefitter should have gone after his own beer that night, because it was the beer that had led to all the trouble. How long ago? Only two days?

Not quite—not until dusk.

It had been dusk then, that other day—the first soft blanket of dusk settling over Bakersfield while the far-off Sierras still held the pale glow of a sun that was gone. The pipefitter had come into the kitchen, tossed money on the littered table, and said, "Make it snappy with your supper, boy—I want you to go for a carton of beer."

"Beer?" His mother's voice came from the bedroom adjoining the kitchen, a soft voice, a young voice. "You want him to get into trouble again?"

"He can get his pal Kelly to buy the beer," the pipefitter answered.

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"Kelly's big enough to pass." Then to Gonzales, "Bring my keys in out of the car when you come back. And take your time. You hear me, punk? Don't come back for an hour."

So Gonzales finished his supper, picked up the money, and went out of the kitchen and across the small yard toward the alley. And at the end of the hour he was drinking the pipefitter's beer with Kelly, hiding among the weeds in a vacant lot.

And Kelly was saying, "What made you stomp the frog? What did you do that for?"

The frog lay crushed on the ground beside Gonzales's foot, dimly seen in the glow of a street lamp.

"You're all the time killing something," Kelly said. "Frogs, bugs, anything."

Gonzales shrugged. It was a thing he just couldn't explain. It was one brief moment of exultation, of striking back at all the things he hated. He tossed the last of the cans into the weeds.

"What we going to do now?" he wondered. "I can't go home without the beer."

"We'll get some more beer," Kelly said.

"From the warehouse?"

"Hell, no."

It had been a mistake, trying to break into the warehouse that time. There had been five of them in the gang and the cops were parked in a car watching them all the time.

"You got any money?" Gonzales asked.

"I'll get some," Kelly promised.

"Roll a drunk in the alley?"

"Too early," Kelly said.

"Then what?"

"We'll hit the welding shop. My uncle keeps a little money in the desk."

"You crazy, man?" Gonzales said. "There's a watchman at the shop. Watchman with a pistol a foot and a half long."

"He's down the street in a restaurant," Kelly said. He started off through the weeds. "Come on."

Gonzales looked again at the frog. In the moment of its death the frog had been the pipefitter from Oregon. The frog had been all the other boarders who had invaded his home before the pipefitter, all the boarders who had ordered him out of the house for an hour. Once there had been a man of his mother's race, his father—but Gonzales couldn't remember that boarder. Too many years had passed since his father moved on to be a boarder in some other woman's house. Gonzales placed his foot deliberately on the mangled frog, pressing slowly, relentlessly, until the pale tongue bulged out like a blob of dough. Then he turned away and walked after Kelly, staggering slightly through the weeds.

Moving cautiously along the alley the two boys came presently to the welding shop and turned into a narrow passageway. They stopped beneath a window and Kelly pushed gently and the window opened.

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"Lock's busted," he whispered. "I hit the cash box like this once before."

"Didn't your uncle miss the money?" Gonzales asked.

"Yeah," Kelly said. "But he thought the watchman took it."

They crawled through the window and into the blackness of the shop. They had felt their way into the office when there was a sharp click and the room was flooded with light. The watchman was sitting at the desk.

He was an old man, thin and stooped. He said in a mild voice, "I saw you pass the restaurant, Kelly, and I came back to wait for you. I thought you'd be around."

Surprised, their minds slowed by the effect of the beer, Kelly and Gonzales stood paralyzed in the center of the room.

The watchman said, "I knew about the lock on the window. And I had a pretty good idea who stole that money last time."

Finding his voice, Kelly said, "I'll put the money back, pops. Just give me a break and don't say anything about it."

The old man shook his head. "No breaks, Kelly," he said. "You almost made me lose my job."

He turned toward the desk and reached for the telephone. "I'm going to call your uncle."

"Don't do it, pops," Kelly said. "Wait a minute . . . listen . . ."

But the watchman had already lifted the receiver to dial.

"Listen," Kelly said, "let's talk this thing over, pops. Listen . . . put the telephone down or I'll slug you!"

The watchman whirled around in his chair and tugged at the heavy gun in his belt. "You slug me," he said "and it'll be the last man you ever slug!"

It all happened very fast. The gun was suddenly in Kelly's hands and the old man was on the floor, his voice starting low, building to a frightened scream, and then into a thin, piercing squeal while the two boys fled through the door and out into the street.

They were plunging blindly through the weeds in the vacant lot when they heard the sirens, and Kelly said, "We've got to get out of town, Gonzales! We're in a bad jam this time!"

Gonzales said, "The pipefitter's Mercury . . . it's in the alley behind my house and the keys are in it."

So they had the gun and now they took the car; but when Kelly pressed the starter there was only the loud whine of meshing gears, blending with the wail of the police sirens, and the pipefitter came out of the kitchen while Gonzales cried, "The ignition, Kelly! Turn on the switch!"

Then the engine came to life and the pipefitter was left behind, running hard, yelling in his great bull voice, "Gonzales! Kelly! Get out of my car! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Where?

Anywhere.

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Going away from Bakersfield. Going across the Sierras and down into the Mohave Desert and on through Death Valley.

Going to Las Vegas to stomp a service station attendant and then into Arizona to rob a waitress who wore matched agate earrings.

Going up a lonely canyon with a man named Smith . . .

There had been no sign of fear in Smith as he went into the mountains. His seeming indifference puzzled Gonzales, filling the boy with uncertainty, and it became increasingly difficult for him to recapture the pitch of excitement that had first prompted him to threaten Smith's life.

Now, after Kelly walked unexpectedly away down the canyon, Gonzales sat on the ground, toying with the gun, watching his prisoner. The boy was very tired and thirsty, and no longer confident of escape.

Here in this alien land of bare rock and shimmering heat, away from the familiar comfort and man-made things—automobiles and concrete highways—Gonzales's courage faded in a growing sense of weakness and futility. Desperately he reached into his mind for something, any thought, that would revive the heroic vision of himself as a desperate gunman—a figure to strike terror into the heart of his enemy who rested, calm and relaxed, only a few feet distant.

He searched for the hatred that would bring arrogance, and final, impulsive revenge on this man who had caused his downfall.

He said, "You shot at me, didn't you?"

"No," Smith contradicted.

"Back there at the fishing camp," Gonzales said, "you shot at me."

"Nobody shot at you," Smith said. "The man who owns the camp shot over your head. He thought it would make you stop."

"You shot at me," Gonzales insisted, unwilling to relinquish his ready motive.

They sat a long time in silence.

"You're just trying to justify yourself," Smith finally said.

"What?"

"You're trying to find an excuse to kill me."

Gonzales didn't answer.

Smith said, "You know, this is all pretty ridiculous."

"It is?"

"Me out here in the Arizona mountains, held at gunpoint by a kid who hasn't even got enough sense to realize what he's doing."

"How much sense have you got?" Gonzales asked.

"Very little," Smith conceded, "or I wouldn't be here in the first place."

"If you had any sense where would you be?" Gonzales asked.

"I'd be at home with my family, where I belong."

"It's too bad you haven't got any sense," Gonzales said.

They sat on the floor of a small basin near the sharp rise of the pin-

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nacles. Here the canyon flattened against the mountainside, and great boulders clung uneasily to the slope.

Gonzales claimed the thin shade of a joshua tree and Smith sat in the sun against a boulder, concealed from the canyon below. He leaned forward, arms draped loosely over his knees, the long brim of his fishing cap pulled low on his forehead. He measured the scant four feet that separated him from the boy, shifting his eyes in search of a possible weapon.

But there was nothing.

In a land built of stone there was not even one small rock within reach.

He said in sudden, reckless anger, "J. Alton Smith, the ineffectual, the expendable, the perennial private in war and in peace, captured in the Pacific in 1943, captured in Arizona in 1956!"

Startled, Gonzales jerked the barrel of the gun up, the dark muzzle searching out the small hollow in Smith's throat. "What?"

"Nothing."

Smith watched the gun, watched the hand that held the gun, watched for the tightening of the finger that half circled the trigger. "Nothing at all," he said.

He waited for a moment of opportunity, his conscious mind racing to explore each possibility, remembering bitter lessons from a distant war. And living now for the moment, he felt a lightness, a freedom, a lifting of the intimate weight of depression that had taken possession of his life. He said, "I think I hear your pal coming back up the canyon."

Across the basin Gonzales leaned to one side, looking through the passageway beside the boulder. Eyes wide and startled, he pulled quickly back and moved crablike toward the boulder, sliding out into the sun through the thin layer of yellowish sand that covered the mahogany brown of the bedrock, putting Smith between himself and the passageway. He cowered hard against the boulder, raising the gun, cocking it, looking over Smith's shoulder.

"So it isn't your pal," Smith said in a soft, controlled voice. "So it must be the cops."

He glanced down at the boy's outstretched ankle, now easily within reach. He looked at the youthful face so openly frightened now, the large eyes bright with panic. He listened to the heavy footsteps coming rapidly up the canyon, stopping abruptly on the opposite side of the boulder.

There was the sound of labored breathing, the dry rustle of paper being unfolded. And then there was movement in the passageway entering the basin. And at that moment Smith hurled himself away from the boulder, grabbed Gonzales's ankle, snatched the boy toward him, and reached wildly for the gun. He was barely conscious of the explosion when the gun went off over his head. He was hardly aware of his own voice calling, "I've got him!"

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He was on his knees, pinning the boy down, now holding the gun in his own hand; then he turned and saw Big Boy standing in the basin, leaning slightly forward, a surprised expression on his face. There was a dark stain high on the deputy's shirt. The huge man tried to swallow, then opened his mouth, and a torrent of blood rushed through his lips. Suddenly he was on the ground, dying, and a piece of newspaper fell from his great, blunt fingers, and several crackers slipped out onto the sand.

And Smith was still on his knees, staring in disbelief, saying, "It's all right, now. I've got him."

He watched the bit of newspaper unfold slowly, and he listened to the far-off horn of a Diesel engine, faint on the still air, washing away through the pinnacles, leaving a strange, sad emptiness, an odd sense of loss. He saw a bandtail lizard run out into the basin and bow in mock dignity.

He heard Gonzales say, "It was self-defense—they can't give me the gas, I'm just a kid."

Then Smith was sitting beside Big Boy, searching vainly for some sign of pulse, when the deputies from Gold Road and Yucca arrived.

And later—he had no idea how long—Smith was walking back down the canyon, the sheriff with him, and the sheriff was saying, "I'll have to pick up some more men and a stretcher. I'll put you off at the bridge and we'll take your skiff in when we come out with the body and the prisoners . . . These things are hard to believe, Mr. Smith. It's just that . . . well, some kids are fortunate—they grow up in good homes and their parents give them a pattern for happiness. But other kids are given a pattern for death. Do you have any children, Mr. Smith?"

And Smith answered, "One. A little boy."

"He's a lucky boy to still have his father," the sheriff said.

Smith was thinking of what the sheriff had said, *Pattern for death* . . . And Smith thought, *you can't run away—there's no place left to run* . . . And the other words the sheriff had said, *Pattern for happiness* . . . It was just as true for happiness—*you can't run away* . . .

They came to the mesquite at the canyon's entrance and the sheriff stopped beside the radio while Kelly crouched against the tree, unwilling to meet their eyes. Then they pushed the sheriff's boat out from shore and the motor snarled angrily, and the boat lifted and planed and slapped briskly at the water. And twenty minutes later Smith entered the cool dimness of the store.

He walked to where Leola waited, incredulity in her eyes. He sat beside his wife, resting his arms wearily on the counter.

Leola said, "I thought . . . I thought something happened to you."

"No," Smith said.

"But something happened to somebody?"

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"Yes."

"Somebody died?"

"A man called Big Boy," Smith said. "A very large man with gray hair. He was hungry. He was eating some crackers."

"But it wasn't you," she whispered. "It wasn't you."

She reached tentative fingers to touch his face. "You're all red from the sun," she said, and her chin trembled. "Why, you're going to blister. I'd better put some cream on your red nose!"

"After a while," he said.

She fought for control, biting her lips. "The car's ready," she said. "We can go on to Las Vegas, now."

He fumbled for words. "Leola—"

"Yes?"

"I was thinking . . ." *You can't run away.* "If it's all right with you, why, we could just forget about Las Vegas."

"Yes?"

"I was thinking . . . there's a lot of water around San Francisco. Do you suppose little Butch is really old enough to go fishing?"

"Oh, yes," she said softly, "I think little Butch is just exactly the right age."

She reached over and touched his hand with a strange shyness, and they walked out together.

When they were gone the storekeeper said. "You know, there's not a single thing exactly right about that woman. She's too thin, her shoulders are too broad, and her face is too long."

"I noticed that," the mechanic said.

"But just the same a more beautiful woman never came down 66."

"I noticed that too," the mechanic said. He pulled a coin from his pocket. "Well, it's been a good day for me. I made a buck." He flipped the coin in the air. "Match you for a beer."

"Double or nothing," the storekeeper said.

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edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GERALD KERSH**

TITLE: ***Macagony's Fist***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: Hooligan's Bar

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *You won't find the lilt of Irish laughter, or the smile of Irish eyes, in this dish of grue. Yet, like the Irish nature, it mixes picric acid with poetry—a bombshell of a story!*

HAVING LEFT THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE to become a salesman of corsets, and having left that job on account of an unconquerable habit of practical demonstration, Macagony became a welterweight boxer. His career in this line is not recorded in the history of the ring. His enemies suggest that he hit the referee with a stout bottle because he was disqualified for biting. He turned up eventually, in 1909, in Nevada, where he went to work in a copper mine.

Here he found his real vocation—blowing things up. He learned exactly what to do with gelignite. If you wanted to know just where to place your ballistite cartridge so as to remove the front of the foreman's house, or precisely how much damage could be done with an oil drum packed with black powder, you went to Macagony. He carried with him a high-explosive atmosphere. He had one of those tense Irish faces, and the traditional Irish nature, which is compounded of equal parts of poetry and picric acid . . . the soul of Dion O'Banion, who sang *The Rose of Tralee* to his aged mother before rushing out to put five bullets into John Dougherty—John Dougherty, who believed in fairies, and murdered Anna Kaniff with an ice pick.

As soon as the Civil War broke out, Macagony went to Dublin to throw some bombs. He must have been the original Irish Troubles. I lost sight of him at that period, and quite forgot him until I met him some time ago in Hooligan's Bar.

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Macagony had changed; aged, lost flesh, and acquired a hunted look. Moreover, there was something wrong with his right hand. It appeared to be horribly deformed—bulbous, like a turnip, and covered with a woolen thing like a sock.

"Nice to see you again," he said, and added, in the same breath, "Loan me five."

That transaction over, the talk turned to the Revolution. I asked him how he had done.

He replied, "Great. Great! I blew up three armored cars. Once, I threw seventy-seven Mills bombs in sixty-three seconds, by the clock."

"Is that how you hurt your hand?"

Macagony became furtive. Then, pocketing my five dollars with his left hand, he soared into a good mood. An Irish good mood. When Irish eyes are smiling, watch your step: and when you hear the lilt of Irish laughter, take care to arm yourself either with a quart bottle or a fire extinguisher. "That . . ." he began; then seized my coat and whispered, "Swear on the head of your mother that you'll keep your lip buttoned."

"You bet I'll keep my lip buttoned."

"I'd get twenty years."

"Do I talk?"

"All right, listen, then. You know I always like a good explosion?"

"Didn't you once put a bicycle pump filled with gunpowder under my chair?"

"Don't interrupt. Well, you know I was in the troubles, eh? Well, it was great. I used to go about with a sawed-down forty-four in me pants pocket, and a Mauser on a lanyard down me leg. . . . Bombs? Unlimited! Sure, I once dropped one down a tuba in a military band. Boy, oh boy, have you ever heard a pineapple explode inside a tuba? You haven't lived, man, till you've heard that. Ahhh . . ."

Macagony sighted an acquaintance—one of the waiters—and leaped up to exchange conversation.

"You'd think he was a baby face," he said, on returning, "but with these two eyes I've seen him shoot six with his own hand when we burned Dunville's Wharf . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes, me mitt."

"You hurt it in an explosion?"

"I did not. It was a different thing altogether. Me and some of the boys was making a bit of a raid on the Orpheus Cinema, see? There was Flash Guinness, there was Guts McGrath, there was—"

"Well, go on."

"Well, first of all, we gets a couple of gasoline cans, see? And I fills them nice and tight with sticks of dynamite, see? And I fits a detonator in each cap, runs a wire, presses the button, and up she goes. See?"

"Very nice."

"I wish you could have been there. There wasn't an unbroken window for miles around. It was raining bits of Black-and-Tan for hours afterwards. The dogs in the streets got into the habit of sitting on their

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haunches with open mouths, making a meal off the falling bits."

"As long as you were kind to animals."

"Sure. Well, we start to make a getaway, when what should we see but a couple of detachments of the Black-and-Tan coming down from both ends of the street. So we broke into a house and got on the roof to fight it out. See?"

"Uh-uh."

"I had a couple of tram-car conductor's money bags full of grenades, and we all had our guns. See? So we held the roof. It was a sight worth seeing. You could hardly see a hand in front of you, for bullets. Murphy got his first. You fire a rifle at a tiled roof and the bullet will ricochet round and round for weeks. It's not fair. Me, I did my best with the bombs, but we were outnumbered, see? They got on the other roof, and we fought a duel from chimney to chimney. It was great. But they were coming in on us, and I was down to me last bomb. There were more of them than us, and most of us nicked but me, so it was time to break for it, and me lead them a chase if I could. Over the roofs I went with me last bomb, slipping and sliding until I couldn't call a breath me own."

"Did you get away?"

"In a manner of speaking. Tucked into the gutter of a roof like a spent leaf. Lying there on my belly, waiting in the dark. And soon enough they showed up, the whole lot of soldiers, checking the streets and the buildings below. Well, I waited till I should see the best chance to use the last grenade. I got me finger in the ring of the pin, and me hand around the bomb, and I waited. Then, at the very last moment, when a bunch of them looked to be getting together, I pulled the pin and threw it away."

"Did you get them all?"

"Not a blessed one. I didn't throw the bomb. I'm too busy ducking back out of sight of the searchlight they swung up on me building! Not a move out of me or I'm done for! Stuck there, see; can't move for fear of getting shot or falling off the roof. And that blinding light—I couldn't see a target if there was one!"

"What did you do?"

"What could I do but wait? With the rain belting me fierce as arrows. Hours before the light goes off; and then I hear it's the soldiers themselves stirring in the rooms below. They've taken up quarters in the house."

"Well?"

"So there I am, me hand tight around the bomb, not daring to move or make a sound. I kept holding down the spring; if I'd let go I'd be in hell in three seconds."

"Good God! What did you do?"

"Nothing. I kept tight hold. I was on that blasted roof for five days. I didn't dare do anything . . ." He winced.

I said, "Five days!"

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"And nights," he said. "Of the foulest, dirtiest weather. Oh, I was stiff as a board when they finally left. It was all I could do to get down off there."

"It's a wonder you made it."

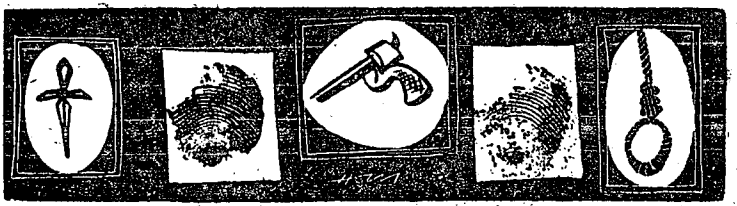
"I know. I was that cramped up. And me arm—me muscles had atrophied, or something. I couldn't open me hand." Macagony tapped his covered right fist.

"And what happened then?"

"Nothing. Nothing, me boy. I resigned meself to me fate, and here I am."

"And the bomb?"

"Here it is to this day," said Macagony, pointing to his bulbous hand, "but don't say a word to anybody. I'd get twenty years if you did. . . . Hey! Wait a minute! Where are you going to, in such a hurry?"



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JACQUELINE CUTLIP**

TITLE: ***The Man at the Latch***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: Girls' summer camp

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Ellen was responsible for five little girls—plump Chip, pretty Julia, shy Marian, quiet Betty, and frightened Celia. Just the six of them in the isolated cabin during a storm—and then Ellen heard the hand at the latch.*

ELLEN FELT A VAGUE UNEASINESS the moment they rounded the bend in the trail and saw the fifteenth cabin. She couldn't explain why. The cabin looked innocent enough, anchored snugly against the incline of pines.

It was the isolation, she told herself, staring down the mountain at the other fourteen cabins. They lay nestled together, sheltered on one side by the main lodge and on the other by the cold little lake that lapped gently at the toes of the camp.

Ellen had been eating dinner when Mrs. Harmon came to the door of the dining hall, her quick fox eyes searching the faces of the counselors until they rested on Ellen. Mrs. Harmon had come to tell her that the cabin Ellen and her group were occupying had sprung a leak in the roof, and since there were clouds in the west, Ellen and her five girls would have to spend the night in the spare cabin a mile up the trail.

They reached the fifteenth cabin shortly before sunset, and if the children felt any presentiment they did not show it. They catapulted onto the wide stone porch and through the vast room, explored the fireplace, and bounced experimentally on the bunks.

Ellen let them out of her sight for exactly ten minutes. While they unpacked their knapsacks she slipped outside for a cigarette she needed

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badly. It was the quiet time that comes just before the end of a long summer day. Ellen sat on a smooth stump and looked about her with tired detachment, for she had been up since dawn. She was aware that her pony-tail had come loose and hung limply down her back. Her muscles ached, and her legs were seamed with welts and dotted with mosquito bites, souvenirs of her two weeks as a junior counselor.

She thought longingly of her own room back in town, of a tub of hot water where she could loll for hours without a pixie face peering through the door and demanding that its hair be braided. Then she felt a pang of guilt, thinking how lucky she was to have an opportunity to study a group of children in their own environment. She was working for her degree in psychology, and being big-sister and official tear-drier to five little girls was infinitely better than clerking in a store during her vacation. There was a thick notebook in her suitcase, waiting for written observations that could be the basis of her Ph.D. thesis. But after the first day Ellen had known it would remain unopened.

The darkness had settled about her almost imperceptibly. From somewhere far below came the bleat of a bugle being blown off key. It was a lonely sound, like a train whistle in the night, and Ellen shivered as she got to her feet and ground out the cigarette.

As though on signal, the screen door of the cabin was flung open and a covey of small girls erupted, shrieking like a flock of frenzied tropical birds in their green and yellow uniforms.

"Heidi!" one of them shouted indignantly. "You'd better come."

Ellen—they had called her Heidi from the very first day—went up the soft path, smiling to herself as they scattered back inside at her approach. She surveyed the room, looking for a snail or a dead frog on someone's pillow. She could see nothing wrong, and it was too early for their nocturnal attacks of homesickness.

"All right, highlanders," she said briskly, "what's it all about?"

Chip, a plump ten-year-old in a smudgy sweater and elderly sneakers, shifted uncomfortably. Julia, the pretty one, tossed a yellow braid nervously over one shoulder and stared intently over Ellen's head.

"You were throwing water," Ellen accused Chip gently, because she liked the sturdy little girl. "A quarrel then," she suggested lightly when they did not answer. Instead of the expected clamor of five magpie mouths opening simultaneously, she was greeted by an unnatural silence. Suddenly they were hovering about her like a group of small frightened animals, their eyes large and luminous in the deepening dusk.

"When are we going back to our own cabin, Heidi?" Marian, the shy one, asked finally. "Couldn't we go tonight?"

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Ellen looked at them, puzzled, wondering if her own sense of something being not quite right had communicated itself to them.

"Of course not," she said. "We'll go back the first thing tomorrow morning, after our roof has been fixed. The weather report says we're to have a storm tonight, and we don't want to sleep under umbrellas, do we? Besides, a bat or a bird could fly through the hole and cause all sorts of mischief." She looked meaningfully at Celia, who became hysterical at the sight of anything larger than a cricket.

They laughed nervously, glancing doubtfully at one another. Even Celia smiled, a curious movement that started at the pinched corners of her thin little mouth and didn't quite make it. Before Ellen knew what was happening, Celia was in her arms, sobbing, dirty, and child-smelling.

"Let's go back, Heidi," she hiccuped. "I want to go home."

"Honey, don't," Ellen begged as the girl burrowed into her lap.

"I want to go *now*. Now!" she cried. "Chip and Julia saw something. Ask them."

Ellen's mouth tightened, remembering the ghost stories one of the senior girls had thoughtlessly told at their last campfire. She made quiet soothing sounds, moving her charges to the long planked bench before the cold hearth.

"Go on, ask them," Celia sniffed, digging for her handkerchief.

"All right," Ellen said agreeably. "Let me guess. An elf? Or a mountain brownie? Both of them perfectly harmless, you know." She made a movement to rise and light the fire, to restore warmth and safety to the room, but they held her to them.

"No, Heidi," Julia said, her eyes glistening with excitement. "It wasn't an elf, or I wouldn't have run. Besides, they wear peaked hats with feathers on them, and this man had on a regular hat. Only it was crushed funny, like someone sat on it."

Chip looked at Julia with unconcealed disgust on her round perspiring face. "Act your age, silly. There haven't been things like elves in this country for years." She turned to Ellen then, her eyes serious behind the horn-rimmed glasses that were as much a part of her as her nose or mouth, and Ellen knew that she would never be fooled by the brownie story. "It *was* a man, Heidi. Just an ordinary everyday man, standing up the trail. He had a stupid laugh."

"A man?" Ellen repeated incredulously. "You must be mistaken, Chip. There's no man around here for miles. Unless you count Mr. Lister." She laughed then, almost giddy with relief. "Of course, poor old Rumplestiltskin." She thought of the old caretaker who had been labeled with the name from a fairy tale. The first time she had seen him he reminded her of a small, innocent gnome. His gentle face was ruddy and serene from continuous outdoor

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living, and his hair floated about his shoulders like a thin silky nimbus. He hunted lost arrows and tennis balls and showed the girls the best places to fish, but Ellen couldn't see him frightening them, not even as a joke.

"It wasn't Rumple," Julia exploded. "He's a hundred years old, and this man was young. Younger than my daddy. About as young as you."

"And big," Celia piped, her proximity to Ellen making her brave. "Bigger than a giant, probably."

"He blocked the trail and wouldn't let us pass. He had a knife, Heidi!" It was little Betty, the quiet one, speaking for the first time."

"A long knife like the one Cooky uses at the lodge, and he was whittling things," said Marian, shivering.

"Don't forget the boots, Chip," Julia reminded importantly.

"Boots that laced clear up to his knees, and he was dirty. He talked to Julia."

The darkness began to close about them like a soft smothering blanket. Somewhere in the back of Ellen's mind a warning hammered, nagging and insistent. "You spoke to him, Julia?" she asked, her voice low with alarm.

Julia's dimple ironed out abruptly. "I didn't speak first," she said defensively. "Honest, I didn't. Ask Chip. We were just starting up the trail behind the cabin to look around and he stepped out from behind a tree and wouldn't let us pass."

Mrs. Harmon should be told, Ellen thought numbly; but how? She couldn't leave them, and it would be even more impossible to start a return trip through the darkness.

"Go on," she said, forcing herself to speak calmly.

Julia glanced hopefully at Chip, who'd turned away and was gazing at the row of open windows and what lay outside.

"Well, Chip ran," Julia went on uncomfortably. "I started to, only I didn't want him to know I was scared. He spoke to me kind of nice and asked how old I was. I said ten, in September, and he laughed and said that was a nice age to be. Then he wanted to know some things about the camp, and I told him and left. That's about all, Heidi."

"The camp?" Ellen whispered, and laughed quickly to cover the slip. "Let's forget about it, shall we? It sounds as if your friend is a lost hunter who probably wandered into camp by mistake."

They grinned weakly, but Chip said astutely, "They aren't allowed to hunt in this state in July. Besides, he didn't have a gun."

Ellen pulled away from them and went to the basket of kindling. "I know what we can do. We'll have a marshmallow roast and maybe learn some new songs." They watched the blue flame lick the edges of the dry wood and burst into a healthy glow. It threw into sharp relief the small bunks that lined the walls beneath the windows and restored a measure of safeness to the room.

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Ellen hunted for Graham crackers and chocolate bars, forcing herself to join in their laughter. If someone is out there listening, she thought, he will think there are more than just six of us.

Once, without actually meaning to, she got up and looked through a black square of windowpane. The evening was coming to life. Far below, lights winked on in the lodge, and from a distance she heard a radio playing. The breeze whipped in the pleasant scent of pine and mingled it with the haze of wood smoke.

Or was it wood smoke, she wondered suddenly. It was more like tobacco smoke from a pipe or a smoldering cigarette. She eased down on the edge of a bunk and pressed her face against the screen. For a moment she thought there had been a movement in the rhododendron bushes that made a flamboyant crescent in front of the cabin.

Then there was a sound, as though someone had shifted uneasily, and a bleak feeling of dread washed over her.

She looked back at the girls. They were cramming blackened marshmallows into their mouths, the man on the trail forgotten with the resiliency of childhood. She wandered over to Julia, deliberately casual, and watched while the girl wiped sticky fingers on the cuffs of her shorts.

"And what did the strange man want to know about our camp, Julia? Did he want to join?"

Julia shrieked. "Don't be silly, Heidi. It's just for girls. He wanted to know how many were here."

"In the entire camp, you mean?"

"Nope, just here. Just us."

"What did you tell him?"

The girl looked at her curiously and Ellen wondered if she had gone too far. "Five. Six with you. Isn't that right?"

Ellen's throat constricted painfully as she remembered newspaper headlines she had read.

"Another thing," Julia said, squinting a little in the fireglow. "Chip'll never admit it, but she cried! The man asked her if he could cut off one of her curls, and Chip said no and ran. He yelled after her and said he'd come and get it while she was asleep, and Chip's afraid he will." Julia giggled, covering her mouth with two little starfish hands. "Golly, Heidi, Chip doesn't have curls. Wasn't that a crazy thing to say?"

Ellen sat down weakly. She knew that she must think clearly now; afterward, there might be no time. The screen door was fastened with a heavy lock, but the windows were pitifully penetrable. One slash with a knife, and the man would have no difficulty climbing through. Once he was in the room—

Once he was in the room, Ellen thought dully. She considered going to the door and screaming into the night until she saw lights coming up the trail, knowing at the same time they would never hear her.

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Through the open door she saw a slice of moon rise above the feathery crest of pines. Then a cobwebbish bit of cloud scudded across its surface. In a few minutes there would be enough light to reveal anyone who tried to approach the cabin.

From deep in the valley the thin uncertain notes of the bugle sounded taps and faded away, and with it went her last bridge to reality.

She looked up suddenly and saw him.

Some inner sense had drawn her gaze to the windows at the far end of the room—and there he was.

He was half obscured by the density of the shadows, but she saw enough. Thin hair as colorless as seaweed straggled from beneath a battered hat and plastered itself across the pale broad forehead. He was staring at Julia, his eyes curiously blank, as she sat sprawled on the hearth assembling her paint box for tomorrow's Arts and Craft class.

Fear and shock coursed through Ellen. She saw the man's eyes leave Julia and sweep slowly around the room. She knew he would see her watching him, yet her head refused to turn. She waited, fascinated, until the little emotionless eyes found hers and held them in a mocking vise, unmoving, unblinking, unafraid.

It seemed that he stood there for an eternity, his gaze insolent and calculating. She had the odd sensation that he was laughing at her, even though there was no sound or facial movement.

He left as quickly and silently as he had come. Ellen got up and moved to the window. He was standing on the edge of pines less than fifty yards away. A spray of moonlight struck him, and she saw for the first time the immensity of him.

"I'm sleepy, Heidi," Chip grumbled as Ellen moved back into the circle of firelight. "Taps sounded a long time ago," she reminded accusingly. The little girl looked young and defenseless in her wrinkled shorts and tiny blouse. There was a briar scratch on one cheek, and she rubbed at it with a dirty fist.

Ellen forced herself to move, to smile, to make bright chatter. She hurried about, straightening sheets and turning down blankets, afraid to think a minute ahead. "Look, we'll pretend tonight that we're gypsies," she said gaily. "We won't wash. We won't even remove our clothes. We'll just lie down on our bunks."

Five pairs of bewildered eyes looked at her, then their owners shrugged and obeyed. It seemed like hours before the whispery giggles and Celia's damp sniffles finally ceased. Ellen smoothed back stray locks of hair and cleansed the scratch on Chip's cheek—anything that would prevent her from glancing at the windows. She knew he was very near; the acrid odor of smoke rose and fell in the sharp clean air.

At last, when they were sleeping,

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when the faint puppylike noises had stopped, Ellen sat down limply.

It was then that the fumbling began. It was a small furtive sound at the door. The hair on the nape of her neck began to rise, and even though she had known it would happen, she couldn't believe it. There were weights in her feet and her legs were those of a sleeper who cannot waken in time to escape the faceless pursuer.

From somewhere in the throat of the slumbering mountains a low grumble of summer thunder began. This is not happening, she told herself. The rain will come, and I will wake up in my bunk with the hot sun stabbing my eyes.

But still the dreadful fumbling went on. Behind her one of the girls whimpered softly and turned. A strange silence descended, and the stillness was more ominous than the sound. The man at the latch was waiting, tense and listening.

Ellen forced herself to get up, driven by something that gave a momentary support to her numb legs. She crossed the room like a sleepwalker, staring blindly into the darkness, wondering how far away he was. It was like measuring the distance of death itself.

Then the moon sneaked out from a veil of clotted clouds. Almost slyly it pointed out the man silhouetted against the trees. For a terrible instant he looked like a grotesque satyr that had just leaped from the black pit of the woods.

Before she could move back he glanced up and saw her. The blank face broke and he began to laugh. The sound was as thin and disembodied as the night around them.

Ellen's eyes swung about the dim room like those of a frantic bird caught in a tightening net. Two chairs, a long bench, and the bunks; a row of copper kettles screwed securely to the wall; an ancient musket that winked futilely over the mantel. In one corner lay a heterogeneous assortment of articles discarded by campers who had been there before them—a broken tennis racket, a misshapen softball, an empty bow.

From somewhere in a niche of her fear-ridden mind Ellen could still hear a voice—the voice of someone who had warned: "Always remember, girls, the only difference between an arrow and a shotgun is that the gun is messier." She remembered them. She had been a freshman in college, and it was her first day of archery. She looked once more at the bow in the corner—dusty and loose-stringed—and the small spurt of hope that had risen in her died again.

The scratching outside began, slowly and deliberately. Ellen wanted to scream at him, to ask him why he was wasting time by trying to break the lock when he could smash the fragile barrier that lay between them with one blow from his fist.

It would be only a matter of minutes now. With a calmness she didn't know was in her, she picked up

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the thin piece of curved lemonwood. It looked small and impotent, but she knew how lethal it could be.

She began her search for the arrows frantically, for the fire had settled to embers and the cabin was almost totally dark. Whoever had left the bow may have left an arrow, she reasoned—just one arrow. In desperate haste she felt along the baseboards, hunched down painfully out of range of the windows, her fingers probing wildly until at last she rose, dizzy and empty-handed.

"Heidi." The small trembling wail from Julia's bunk made Ellen's heart twist inside her. "I feel sick."

"What is it, honey?" Ellen's careful whisper was amplified by the stillness and the knowledge that the man had paused to listen.

"My stomach. It feels funny."

Ellen tiptoed to the bunk. She could just make out the little face, pale now under its chronic sunburn.

"I guess I ate too many marshmallows," Julia whimpered, tears sliding down her cheeks. The tight little stomach flinched under Ellen's feather touch. "Don't, Heidi! It's sore."

Ellen sank back, feeling that a bog of quicksand was sucking at the last vestige of her sanity. It could be indigestion, but what if it weren't? Five inexorable hours must pass before dawn, and a ruptured appendix wouldn't wait.

She put her mouth close to Julia's ear. "Do you feel nauseous? Are you sick, Julia?"

Her answer was a muffled sob as Julia doubled up in a seizure of pain.

"Listen carefully," Ellen said, her voice low and urgent. "I think there's a bear outside scattering garbage, Julia. I've heard him for quite a while, and I think he's rather a large one. I'll have to go to the lodge and tell Mrs. Harmon and Rumple to bring blankets so we can take you down there until you feel better. But I'd rather not go outside while the bear is prowling about." She paused, listening with bated breath. There was nothing but the staccato noise of insects doing their death dance against the screens. She went on, "I've found a bow, and if I had an arrow I think I could frighten the bear away. Did you see any arrows in the cabin?"

Julia looked up, her mouth making grimaces of pain, but there was a flicker of interest in her eyes. "A real bear, Heidi?"

Ellen nodded, praying. "I wouldn't actually hurt him."

"I wish I could see him," Julia sighed, turning, and for a breathless instant Ellen thought she was trying to get up. Instead, she put her cheek against the rumpled pillow and closed her eyes. "I hope you don't hurt him." And then, stifling a sob, "I wish I could go home. I wish my mommy was here."

"Don't go back to sleep!" Ellen shook the girl gently. "The arrow, Julia! Have you seen one?"

"I don't think so." The little girl's

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voice seemed to come from far away, on the verge of sleep.

There was nothing to do but sit and wait, Ellen told herself dully. She sat down and listened, her breath suppressed. There was nothing but a vast resounding silence punctuated by the small mysterious cracklings of the woods.

"Heidi." It was a faint thread of sound. "The mantel. But don't tell Chip I told. She forgot to take them back to the lodge after target practice this afternoon." Julia's small face was wrinkled with pain.

Ellen could have cried with relief. She went to the high shelf and ran frenzied hands over a bottle of dead insects and someone's dried leaf collection. Then she felt the quiver. She clutched it to her briefly before she could summon the courage to look at it. It was nearly full.

She worked rapidly in the darkness, and when she finally rose the string of the bow was as taut as her muscles. The rain had started, spattering big lethargic drops at first, and then coming more quickly until it writhed and lashed around the cabin. She went to the door, letting the tiny cold needles drench her, and it was like an unexpected calming slap across her face.

He must have been waiting for the rain. Before she could move back, he was there, his face so close to hers that she could smell the bitter unclean odor of him.

"Let me in, little girl."

Ellen didn't know what she had expected his voice to be like, but she wasn't prepared for the reedy childlike sound that came from the giant body. In it lurked the awful craftiness of the slow-witted.

"Go away," she managed to whisper, surprised that her own voice could escape from the belt that prisoned it in her throat. "For the love of heaven, go away!"

It was as if she had never spoken. He peered over her shoulder into the darkened cabin, unmoving, his face devoid of pity or hate. The rain pasted the long hair to the sides of his head and Ellen could see the thick ropy arms swelling under the clinging shirt.

"Better let me in, little girl," he said again in the same singsong tone. "It's getting cold out here. Just let me in till I get dry. I won't tell your mother."

"I've called the lodge," Ellen said desperately, waiting for a sound from one of the bunks. "You'd better go before they come."

Anger blotched his face, then was gone. "No, you didn't," he said mildly. He laughed then, and Ellen knew why it had frightened the girls.

"I have a gun," she said, glad that the fury of the storm would drown out the uncontrollable hysteria that threatened to overcome her.

He looked down at her, almost pityingly, with only the tenuous screen separating them. "You might as well unlock the door. I can tear it down easy. I got strong hands." He held them up before his face and

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squinted at them as though seeing them for the first time.

"You can't come in," Ellen said, her voice shaking as she felt the cold perspiration of hopelessness shoot through her pores. "Please! There's no one here but a bunch of small girls."

"I know. I watched them." And then, wheedling, "I won't hurt them. If you'll let me in till I get dry I'll go away and make you no trouble." He sounded pleased with himself, like a little boy who had told a successful lie.

She knew then that there was no reason in him, and she moved back gradually until she felt the wall touch her spine. The bow was smooth and pliant in her icy hands. She nocked the arrow and stood waiting. He had sensed her withdrawal, and with a low growl he bent to the lock and tried it again, twisting and worrying at it. It held. He lifted one fist and began to shatter the screen.

Only his proximity gave her the strength to lift the bow to her shoulder. She steeled herself to wait while he put his hand through the opening. The fumbling jerked into a sharp click and he swung open the mutilated door. He stood quietly, grinning at her, his unbelievably long arms hanging loosely at his sides.

A strip of lightning skittered across the sky, and in that instant Ellen sighted. She counted off the seconds by heartbeats. She heard the twang of the bowstring and the soft plop as the arrow tore into his flesh. A crazed roar broke above the noise of the storm, and the man fell back, his heavy body thudding as it struck the stone floor of the porch.

Then the leaden night was lit again, briefly, and she saw him sitting there like some streaming Cyclopean sea monster washed up by the waves. He held the arrow in his hand, staring at it in bewilderment.

She heard him get up. She heard him walk off the porch. Sheer frozen terror propelled her to the door to watch. He was sloshing through the puddles, stooping now and then to grovel for something. He moved in a pantomime of horror, and when he turned he had the knife.

She heard the clop of his boots as he came back. There would be no postponement now, no arguing or pleading. The arrow had probably struck him in the hand or shoulder. It had been as ineffectual as fending off a mad dog with a knitting needle.

Then he loomed in the doorway. Trancelike, Ellen inserted another arrow and pulled the bow back. Somewhere in her body a muscle tore savagely, but she did not feel the pain.

A high shivering scream keened with the storm, and she stumbled to look, disbelieving. He was lying sprawled at the base of the steps like a fantastically broken doll. The rain sluiced down, beating him gently into the mud . . .

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For hours she watched, barely moving, until the thin shreds of dawn crept through the steady downpour; only then did she go to sit by the emberless hearth. In the gray half-light she looked at herself, seeing the wrinkled shorts and the mud-spattered shirt, and knew that the night had not been a dream.

At six o'clock, when the children began their slow restless process of waking up, she got up to look through the now drizzling mist. The man was gone. The screen door was there, its ragged edges mute evidence of what had happened in the night; but he was gone. There was nothing to indicate that he had ever been there except for a slight indentation in the clayish mud.

She stepped back, swaying, wondering if it were to begin again. Then the rainswept wind snatched at a voice on the trail, sharply excited and far away, and she knew that it was someone from the lodge.

She watched them emerge from the path. Mr. Lister, stiff-legged and quivering from the climb, and Mrs. Harmon. They were followed by two men in crisp beige uniforms who kept looking at the pines.

Mrs. Harmon left them and marched determinedly up to Ellen. She eyed the bedraggled shorts with undisguised disapproval. "I really didn't expect you to be up, Ellen," she began. "We've had all sorts of disturbances below. These men are from the state police barracks." She glared at the two officers who didn't seem to be listening. "They're looking for a man who escaped from the Stotlerville prison. They insist that we get everyone together in the lodge so they can search the area." Her voice was shrill with annoyance.

When Ellen did not reply, she said, "What's wrong? You look ill." Her tone implied that she was more impatient than solicitous.

One of the state troopers who had been studying the ground came back to Ellen and looked at her curiously. "Those tracks," he said, "and the smear of blood on the steps. Was there any trouble up here last night, Miss?"

Ellen wanted to speak, but all she could do was to point wordlessly toward the edge of woods.

He didn't move, waiting patiently until she was able to talk. Then the other one hurried back down the trail.

Mrs. Harmon sank onto the porch steps, staring at Ellen in horrible fascination. Her pudgy tanned fingers beat a tattoo on the stone for a moment, and then without speaking she took a cigarette case from her pocket and offered it to Ellen.

"The girls slept through it all," Ellen said finally. "You said he was an escaped convict?"

Mrs. Harmon glanced at her. Her eyes were grim. "Worse than that, Ellen. Stotlerville houses the criminally insane of three states. From what the policemen said, this was their prize pupil."

Ellen studied the blue haze of her

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cigarette as it lifted on the breeze and slowly disappeared. She got to her feet unsteadily, laughing a little. Mrs. Harmon put out a restraining arm.

"No one could go through that without some sort of delayed reaction. But try not to let the girls know anything is wrong until we get them safely down to the lodge."

"I'm not hysterical," Ellen said. "I just remembered that I was asked to drop archery at the end of the first semester. I could never hit the target."

She turned and went back into the cabin. She didn't even pause at the skeleton of the shattered door. There wasn't time. From somewhere inside she heard scuffling noises and a fretful voice shouting, "Heidi! I need you!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***The Servant Problem***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Miss Jane Marple
LOCALE:	St. Mary Mead, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The Case of the Two Maiden Ladies and their Very Paragon and Treasure of a Maid — the perfect mystery for Miss Marple, spinster-sleuth and expert on village affairs . . .*

OH, IF YOU PLEASE, M'AM, COULD I speak to you a moment?"

Miss Marple said promptly, "Certainly, Edna. Come in and shut the door. What is it?"

Obediently shutting the door, Miss Marple's little maid advanced into the room, pleated the corner of her apron between her fingers, and swallowed once or twice.

"Yes, Edna?" said Miss Marple encouragingly.

"Oh, please, M'am, it's my cousin Gladdie."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple, her mind leaping to the worst—and, alas, the most usual conclusion. "Not—not in *trouble?*"

Edna hastened to reassure her.

"Oh, no, M'am, nothing of *that* kind. It's just that she's upset. You see, she's lost her place."

"Dear me, I am sorry to hear that. She was at Old Hall, wasn't she, with the Miss—Misses—Skinner?"

"Yes, M'am, that's right. And Gladdie's very upset about it—very upset indeed."

"Gladys has changed places rather often before, though, hasn't she?"

"Oh, yes, M'am. She's always one for a change, Gladdie is. She never seems to get really *settled,* if you know what I mean. But she's always been the one to *give* the notice, you see!"

© 1942 by Agatha Christie; originally titled "The Case of the Perfect Maid"

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"And this time it's the other way round?" said Miss Marple dryly.

"Yes, M'am, and it's upset Gladdie something awful."

Miss Marple looked slightly surprised. Her recollection of Gladys, who had occasionally come to drink tea in the kitchen on her "days out," was of a stout, giggling girl of unshakably equable temperament.

Edna went on. "You see, M'am, it's the *way* it happened—the way Miss Skinner looked."

"How," inquired Miss Marple patiently, "did Miss Skinner look?"

This time Edna got well under way with her news bulletin.

"Oh, M'am, it was ever such a shock to Gladdie. You see, one of Miss Emily's brooches was missing and such a hue and cry for it as never was, and, of course, nobody likes a thing like that to happen—it's upsetting, M'am, if you know what I mean. And Gladdie helped search *everywhere,* and there was Miss Lavinia saying she was going to the police about it, and then it turned up again, pushed right to the back of a drawer in the dressing-table, and *very* thankful Gladdie was. And the very next day as ever was a plate got broken, and Miss Lavinia she bounced out right away and told Gladdie to take a month's notice. And what Gladdie feels is it *couldn't* have been the plate, and that Miss Lavinia was just making an excuse of that, and that it must be because of the brooch, and they think as she took it and put it back when the police was mentioned, and Gladdie wouldn't do such a thing, and what she feels is as it will get round and tell against her, and it's a very serious thing for a girl, as you know, M'am."

Miss Marple nodded.

Edna said wistfully, "I suppose, M'am, there isn't anything you could do about it? Gladdie's in ever such a state."

"Tell her not to be silly," said Miss Marple crisply. "If she didn't take the brooch—which I'm sure she didn't—then she has no cause to be upset."

"It'll get about," said Edna dismally.

"I—er—am going up that way this afternoon," said Miss Marple. "I'll have a word with the Misses Skinner."

"Oh! *thank* you, M'am," said Edna.

Old Hall was a big Victorian house surrounded by woods and parkland. Since it had proved unlettable and unsalable as it was, an enterprising speculator had divided it into four flats with a central hot-water system, and the use of "the grounds" to be held in common by the tenants.

The experiment had been satisfactory. A rich and eccentric old lady and her maid occupied one flat. The old lady had a passion for birds and entertained a feathered gathering to meals every day. A retired Indian

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judge and his wife rented a second flat. A very young couple, recently married, occupied the third, and the fourth had been taken only two months ago by two maiden ladies named Skinner.

The four sets of tenants were only on the most distant terms with each other, since none of them had anything in common. The landlord had been heard to say that this was an excellent thing. What he dreaded were friendships followed by estrangements and subsequent complaints to him.

Miss Marple was acquainted with all the tenants, though she knew none of them well. The elder Miss Skinner, Miss Lavinia, was what might be termed the working member of the firm. Miss Emily, the younger, spent most of her time in bed suffering from various complaints which, in the opinion of St. Mary Mead, were largely imaginary. Only Miss Lavinia believed devoutly in her sister's martyrdom and patience under affliction, and willingly ran errands and trotted up and down to the village for things that "my sister had suddenly fancied."

It was the view of St. Mary Mead that if Miss Emily suffered half as much as she said she did, she would have sent for Doctor Haydock long ago. But Miss Emily, when this was hinted to her, shut her eyes in a superior way and murmured that her case was not a simple one—the best specialists in London had been baffled by it—and that a wonderful new man had put her on a most revolutionary course of treatment and that she really hoped her health would improve under it. No humdrum G.P. could *possibly* understand her case.

"And it's my opinion," said the outspoken Miss Hartnell, "that she's very wise not to send for him. Dear Doctor Haydock would tell her that there was nothing the matter with her and to get up and not make a fuss. Do her a lot of good!"

Failing such arbitrary treatment, however, Miss Emily continued to lie on sofas, to surround herself with strange little pillboxes, and to reject nearly everything that had been cooked for her and ask for something else.

The door was opened to Miss Marple by Gladdie, looking more depressed than Miss Marple had ever thought possible. In the sitting-room Miss Lavinia rose to greet Miss Marple.

Lavinia Skinner was a tall, gaunt, bony female of fifty. She had a gruff voice and an abrupt manner.

"Nice to see you," she said. "Emily's lying down—feeling low today, poor dear. Hope she'll see you, it would cheer her up, but there are times when she doesn't feel up to seeing *anybody*. Poor dear, she's wonderfully patient."

Miss Marple responded politely. Servants were the main topic of conversation in St. Mary Mead, so it was not difficult to lead the conversation in that direction. Miss Marple

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said she had heard that that nice girl, Gladys Holmes, was leaving.

Miss Lavinia nodded. "Wednesday week. Broke things, you know."

Miss Marple sighed and said we all had to put up with things nowadays. Did Miss Skinner really think it was *wise* to part with Gladys?

"Know it's difficult to get servants," admitted Miss Lavinia. "The Devereuxs haven't got *anybody*—but then I don't wonder—always quarreling, jazz on all night—meals any time. Then the Larkins have just lost *their* maid. Of course, what with the judge's Indian temper and his wanting Chota Hazri, as he calls it, at six in the morning, and Mrs. Larkin always fussing, I don't wonder at that, either. Mrs. Carmichael's Janet is a fixture, of course—though in my opinion she's the most disagreeable woman and absolutely *bullies* the old lady."

"Then don't you think you might reconsider your decision about Gladys? She really is a nice girl. I know all her family—very honest and superior."

Miss Lavinia shook her head.

Miss Marple murmured, "You missed a brooch, I understand—"

"Now who has been talking? I suppose the girl has. Quite frankly, I'm almost certain she took it. And then got frightened and put it back—but of course one can't say anything unless one is *sure*." She changed the subject. "Do come and see Miss Emily, Miss Marple. I'm sure it would do her good."

Miss Marple followed meekly to where Miss Lavinia knocked on a door, was bidden enter, and ushered her guest into the best room in the flat, most of the light of which was excluded by half-drawn blinds. Miss Emily was lying in bed.

The dim light showed her to be a thin, indecisive-looking creature with a good deal of grayish-yellow hair untidily wound round her head and erupting into curls—the whole thing looking like a bird's nest of which no self-respecting bird could be proud. There was a smell in the room of eau-de-cologne, stale biscuits, and camphor.

With half-closed eyes and in a thin, weak voice Emily Skinner explained that this was one of her *bad* days.

"The worst of ill health is," said Miss Emily in a melancholy tone, "that one knows what a *burden* one is to everyone around one."

"No, no, Emily dear, indeed that is not so," protested her sister.

"Lavinia is very good to me," said Miss Emily. "Lavvie dear, I do so hate giving trouble, but if my hot-water bottle could only be filled in the way I like it—*too* full it weighs on me so; on the other hand, if it is not *sufficiently* filled, it gets *cold* immediately!"

"I'm sorry, dear. Give it to me. I will empty a little out."

"Perhaps, if you're doing that, it might be refilled. There are no rusks in the house, I suppose—no, no, it doesn't matter. I can do without.

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Some weak tea and a slice of lemon —I think the milk was slightly turned this morning—it has put me right against milk in my tea. It doesn't matter. I can do without my tea. Only I do feel so weak. Oysters, they say, are nourishing—I wonder if I could fancy a few? No, no, too much bother to get hold of them so late in the day. I can fast until tomorrow."

Lavinia left the room, murmuring something incoherent about bicycling down to the village.

Miss Marple told Edna that evening that she was afraid her mission had met with no success.

She was rather troubled to find that rumors as to Gladys's dishonesty were already going round the village.

In the Post Office, Miss Wetherby tackled her. "My dear Jane, they gave her a written reference saying she was willing and sober and respectable, but saying nothing about *honestly*—that seems to me *most* significant! They'll find it most difficult to get anyone else. Girls simply *will not go* to Old Hall. You'll see, the Skinners won't find anyone else, and then perhaps that dreadful hypochondriac sister will *have* to get up and do something!"

Great was the chagrin of the village when it was made known that the Misses Skinner had engaged, from an agency, a new maid who, by all accounts, was a perfect paragon.

"A three years' reference recommending her most warmly; she *prefers* the country and actually asks less wages than Gladys. I really feel we have been *most* fortunate."

It then became the opinion of St. Mary Mead that the paragon would cry off at the last minute.

None of these prognostications came true, however, and the village was able to observe the domestic treasure—by name, Mary Higgins—driving through the village in Reed's taxi to Old Hall. A most respectable-looking woman, very neatly dressed . . .

When Miss Marple next visited Old Hall, on the occasion of recruiting stallholders for the Vicarage Fête, Mary Higgins opened the door. She was certainly a superior-looking maid, at a guess forty years of age, with neat black hair, rosy cheeks, a plump figure discreetly arrayed in black with a white apron and a cap—"quite the good, old-fashioned type of servant," as Miss Marple explained afterwards, and with the proper respectful voice.

Miss Lavinia was looking far less harassed than usual, and although she regretted that she could not take a stall owing to her preoccupation with her sister, she nevertheless tendered a handsome monetary contribution and promised to produce a consignment of pen-wipers and babies' socks.

Miss Marple commented on her air of well-being.

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"I really feel I owe a great deal to Mary. I am so *thankful* I had the resolution to get rid of that other girl. Mary is really *invaluable*. Cooks nicely and waits beautifully and keeps our little flat scrupulously clean—mattresses turned *every day*. And she is really *wonderful* with Emily!"

Miss Marple hastily inquired after Emily.

"Oh, poor dear, she has been very much under the weather lately. She can't help it, of course, but it really makes things a little *difficult*, sometimes. Wanting certain things cooked and then, when they come, saying she can't eat now—and then wanting them again half an hour later. It makes, of course, a lot of work—but fortunately Mary does not seem to mind *at all*. She's been used to waiting on invalids, she says, and understands them. It is such a *comfort*."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple. "You *are* fortunate."

"Yes, indeed. I really feel Mary has been sent to us as an answer to *prayer*."

"She sounds to me," said Miss Marple, "almost too good to be true. I should—well, I should be a little careful if I were you."

Lavinia Skinner failed to perceive the point of this remark. She said, "Oh! I assure you I do all I can to make her comfortable. I don't know what I should do if she left."

"I don't expect she'll leave until she's ready to leave," said Miss Marple, and stared very hard at her hostess.

"If one has no domestic worries," said Miss Lavinia, "it takes such a load off one's mind, doesn't it? How is your little Edna shaping?"

"She's doing quite nicely. Not much *head*, of course. Not like your Mary. Still, I do know all about Edna, because she's a village girl."

Again she stared hard at Miss Lavinia, then sighed and changed the subject, asking if she should go in and see Miss Emily.

"Not today, I'm afraid," said Lavinia, shaking her head. "Poor Emily is quite unfit for visitors."

Miss Marple expressed polite sympathy and took her leave.

As she went out into the hall she heard the invalid's voice fretfully raised: "This compress has been allowed to get quite dry—Doctor Allerton particularly said moisture *continually* renewed. There, there, leave it. I want a cup of tea and a boiled egg—boiled only three minutes and a half, remember—and send Miss Lavinia to me."

The efficient Mary emerged from the bedroom, and saying to Lavinia, "Miss Emily is asking for you, Madam," proceeded to open the door for Miss Marple, helping her into her coat and handing her her umbrella.

Miss Marple took the umbrella, dropped it, tried to pick it up, and dropped her bag, which flew open. Mary politely retrieved various odds and ends—a handkerchief, an engagement book, an old-fashioned

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leather purse, two shillings, three pennies, and a striped piece of peppermint rock.

Miss Marple received the last with some signs of confusion.

"Oh, *dear,* that must have been Mrs. Clement's little boy. He was sucking it, I remember, and he took my bag to play with. He must have put it inside. It's terribly sticky, isn't it?"

"Shall I take it, madam?"

"Oh, would you? Thank you so much."

Mary stooped to retrieve the last item, a small mirror, upon recovering which Miss Marple exclaimed fervently, "How lucky now that that isn't broken!"

She thereupon departed, Mary standing politely by the door holding a piece of striped rock with a completely expressionless face.

For ten days longer St. Mary Mead had to endure hearing of the excellencies of Miss Lavinia's and Miss Emily's treasure. On the eleventh day, the village awoke to its big thrill.

Mary, the paragon, was missing. Her bed had not been slept in and the front door was found ajar. She had slipped out quietly during the night.

And not Mary alone was missing! Two brooches and five rings of Miss Lavinia's; three rings, a pendant, a bracelet, and four brooches of Miss Emily's were missing also!

It was the beginning of a chapter of catastrophe in the big Victorian house with four flats.

Young Mrs. Devereux had lost her diamonds which she kept in an unlocked drawer, and also some valuable furs given to her as a wedding present. The judge and his wife also had had jewelry taken and a certain amount of money. Mrs. Carmichael was the greatest sufferer: not only had she some very valuable jewels taken but she also kept in the flat a large sum of money, which was gone. It had been Janet's evening out and her mistress was in the habit of walking round the gardens at dusk calling to the birds and scattering crumbs. It seemed clear that Mary, the perfect maid, had had keys to fit all four flats!

There was, it must be confessed, a certain amount of ill-natured pleasure in St. Mary Mead. Miss Lavinia had boasted so much of her marvelous Mary.

"And all the time, my dear, just a common *thief!*"

Interesting revelations followed. Not only had Mary disappeared into the blue but the agency which had provided her and vouched for her credentials was alarmed to find that the Mary Higgins who had applied to them and whose references they had taken up had, to all intents and purposes, never existed. It was the name of a *bona fide* servant who had lived with the *bona fide* sister of a dean, but the real Mary Higgins was existing peacefully in a place in Cornwall.

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"Damned clever, the whole thing," Inspector Slack was forced to admit. "And if you ask me, that woman works in with a gang. There was a case of much the same kind in Northumberland a year ago. Stuff was never traced and they never caught her. However, we'll do better than that in Much Benham!"

Nevertheless, weeks passed and Mary Higgins remained triumphantly at large. In vain Inspector Slack redoubled the energy that so belied his name.

Miss Lavinia remained tearful. Miss Emily was so upset, and felt so alarmed by her condition, that she actually sent for Doctor Haydock.

The whole of the village was terribly anxious to know what he thought of Miss Emily's claims to ill health, but naturally could not ask him.

Satisfactory data came to hand on the subject, however, through Mr. Meek, the chemist's assistant, who was walking out with Clara, Mrs. Price-Ridley's maid. It was then known that Doctor Haydock had prescribed a mixture of asafetida and valerian which, according to Mr. Meek, was the stock remedy for malingerers in the Army! It was felt that this settled the question of Miss Emily's health once and for all, and great admiration was felt for Doctor Haydock's masterly handling of the case.

Soon afterwards it was learned that Miss Emily, not relishing the medical attention she had had, was declaring that in the state of her health she felt it her duty to be near the specialist in London who *understood* her case. It was, she said, only fair to Lavinia.

The flat was put up for subletting.

It was a few days after that that Miss Marple, rather pink and flustered, called at the police station in Much Benham and asked for Inspector Slack.

Inspector Slack did not like Miss Marple. But he was aware that the Chief Constable, Colonel Melchett, did not share that feeling. Rather grudgingly, therefore, he received her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Marple. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, dear," said Miss Marple, "I'm afraid you're in a hurry."

"Lot of work on," said Inspector Slack, "but I can spare a few moments."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Marple, "I hope I shall be able to put what I say properly. So difficult, you know, to explain oneself, don't you think? No, perhaps you don't. But you see, not having been educated in the modern style—just a governess, you know, who taught one the date of the Kings of England and General Knowledge—Doctor Brewer—three kinds of diseases of wheat—blight, mildew—now what was the third—was it *smut?*"

"Do you want to talk about smut?" asked Inspector Slack, and then blushed.

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"Oh, no, no. Just an *illustration*, you know. It's about the Misses Skinner's maid. Gladys, you know."

"Mary Higgins," said Inspector Slack.

"Oh, yes, the *second* maid. But it's Gladys Holmes I mean—rather an impertinent girl and far too pleased with herself, but really strictly honest, and it's *so* important that that should be *recognized*."

"No charge against *her* so far as I know," said the Inspector.

"No, I know there isn't a charge—but that makes it worse. Because, you see, people go on *thinking* things. Oh, dear—I knew I should explain badly. What I really mean is that the important thing is to find Mary Higgins."

"Certainly," said Inspector Slack. "Have you any ideas on the subject?"

He grudgingly remembered that Miss Marple's ideas had occasionally proved of use in the administration of justice.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I *have*," said Miss Marple. "May I ask you a question? Are her fingerprints of any use to you?"

"Ah!" said Inspector Slack, "that's where she was a bit too artful for us. Did most of her work in rubber gloves or housemaid's gloves, it seems. And she'd been careful—wiped off everything in her bedroom and on the sink. Couldn't find a single fingerprint in the place!"

"If you did have her fingerprints, would it help?"

"It might, madam—they may be known at the Yard. This isn't her first job, I'd say!"

Miss Marple nodded brightly. She opened her bag and extracted a small cardboard box. Inside it, wedged in cotton-wool, was a small mirror.

"From my handbag," said Miss Marple. "The maid's prints are on it. I *think* they should be satisfactory—she touched an extremely sticky substance a moment previously."

Inspector Slack stared. "Did you get her fingerprints on purpose?"

"Of course."

"You suspected her, then?"

"Well, you know, it did strike me that she was a little *too good to be true*. I practically told Miss Lavinia so—but she simply wouldn't take the hint! I'm afraid, you know, Inspector, that I don't believe in *paragons*. Most of us have our faults—and domestic service shows them up very quickly!"

"Well," said Inspector Slack, recovering his balance. "I'm obliged to you, I'm sure. We'll send these up to the Yard and see what they have to say."

He stopped. Miss Marple had put her head a little to one side and was regarding him with a good deal of meaning.

"You wouldn't consider, I suppose, Inspector, looking a little *nearer home?*"

"What do you mean, Miss Marple?"

"It's very difficult to explain, but when you come across a peculiar

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thing you notice it. Although, often, peculiar things may be the merest trifles. I've felt that all along, you know—I mean, about Gladys and the brooch. She's an honest girl, she didn't take that brooch—then *why did Miss Skinner think she did?* Miss Skinner's not a fool, far from it! Why was she so anxious to let a girl go who was a good servant, when servants are hard to get? It was *peculiar,* you know. So I wondered . . . I wondered a good deal. And I noticed another peculiar thing. Miss Emily's a hypochondriac—but she's the first hypochondriac who hasn't sent for some doctor or other at once. Hypochondriacs *love* doctors. Miss Emily didn't!"

"What are you suggesting, Miss Marple?" Inspector Slack was still quite fogged.

"Well, I'm suggesting, you know, that Miss Lavinia and Miss Emily are peculiar people. Miss Emily spends nearly all her time in a dark room. And if that hair of hers isn't a wig I—I'll eat my own back switch! And what I say is this—it's perfectly possible for a thin, pale, gray-haired, whining woman to be the same as a black-haired, rosy-cheeked, plump woman. And nobody that *I* can find ever *saw Miss Emily and Mary Higgins at one and the same time!* Plenty of time to get impressions of all the keys, plenty of time to find out all about the other tenants, and then—get rid of the local girl. Miss Emily takes a brisk walk across country one night and arrives at the station as Mary Higgins next day. And then, at the right moment, Mary Higgins disappears, and off goes the hue and cry after *her!*

"I'll tell you where you'll find her, Inspector. On Miss Emily Skinner's sofa! Get *her* fingerprints if you don't believe me, and you'll find I'm right! A couple of clever thieves, that's what the Skinners are—and no doubt in league with a clever post and rails, or fence, or whatever you call it. But they won't get away with it *this* time! I'm not going to have one of our village girl's character for honesty taken away like that! Gladys Holmes is as honest as the day and everybody's going to know it! Good afternoon!"

Miss Marple had stalked out before Inspector Slack had fully recovered.

"Whew!" he muttered. "I wonder if she's right?"

He soon found out that Miss Marple was right again.

Colonel Melchett congratulated Slack on his efficiency, and Miss Marple arranged for Gladys to come to tea with Edna and spoke to her seriously on settling down in a good situation when she got one.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES GREEN**

TITLE: ***The Serafina Caper***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Bernie Halper

LOCALE: Washington Square, New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Another amazing adventure of Bernie Halper, the sixteen-year-old with the jet-propelled imagination. All Bernie ever needs is the tiniest hint—and again the game's afoot!*

I'M IN THE BIGGEST JAM OF MY entire life. Just because I had to shoot my mouth off about kidnaping Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

It happened this way: Joanie and I were yattating on a bench in Washington Square. One of the Park's shoeshine grandpas came shuffling along. With Joanie around, I figured the gesture was worth the price of a shine. So I motioned to him, and the old guy settled down with his pad and box and things.

And then Joanie said, "Why, there's Mrs. Roosevelt."

Yes, it could be Mrs. Roosevelt. Coming toward us along the path. But there was nothing too spectacular about that when you remembered that for many years her New York apartment used to be on Washington Square West. She happened to glance our way, and Joanie gave her a timid little wave. Mrs. Roosevelt responded with a quick, friendly smile and walked on past our bench.

"You saw it, Bernie?" Joanie said in a tizzy of excitement. "You saw her smile back at me? What a wonderful, wonderful person! Wonder if she still has Fala's grandson?"

Now that irritated me. I mean, I've absolutely nothing against Mrs. Roosevelt. Though Pop is a Democrat and Mom loves Ike, I've no political affiliations. Five years from now, when I'm old enough to vote,

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I'll make up my mind. And even then I'll probably vote Independent, because I like the sound of it.

No, it's just the idea of people fawning over celebrities. Like Joanie being up there in Seventh Heaven because she got a smile from Mrs. Roosevelt. So I decided to wipe that silly smirk off Joan's kisser.

"Seems to me," I said, "Mrs. Roosevelt needs a couple of Great Danes lots more than a Scottie."

"What on earth for?" asked Joanie.

Shoeshine grandpa tapped my leg to say he was ready for the other shoe. I swapped feet on the box and said, "Protection. No Secret Service men trail her nowadays. Suppose someone should decide to kidnap her?"

It got rid of the smirk, all right. Joanie blinked, and then her cheeks went pink with annoyance. "If you're trying to be funny, Bernie," she said stiffly, "I suggest you pick a less revolting subject. Why, the very idea! Besides, you know perfectly well there's no earthly reason why anyone should want to kidnap Mrs. Roosevelt."

"All right," I said. "Skip it."

But that was pretty typical of Joanie. A closed mind. So there was no earthly reason, eh, why anyone should want to kidnap Mrs. Roosevelt? F.D.R.'s widow. A Big Shot in the United Nations. Brother, what a trump card to hold when the final chips start falling in an International Crisis!

I got to thinking about how they could pull it off, when shoeshine grandpa tapped my foot to tell me he was finished. I gave him a quarter, thus being a bigger shot than I really had to be.

And then he said, looking straight at me, "My Serafina she's a kidnap."

Why, it was as if a horse spoke to you, you know? A doddery old shoeshine man, still kneeling as he blinked at me through steel-rimmed glasses patched with adhesive, making the fantastic claim that he was related to a kidnaper!

"Will you repeat that, please?" I said.

"My Serafina she's a kidnap."

I saw tears fill his eyes as a lump went bobbing down his thin, wrinkled neck. So it was no gag. The old man *meant* it.

Serafina? His wife, probably. Their children all married and moved away. The lonely old lady goes off her rocker. Develops a psychotic craving to clutch a bambino to her breast. So she sees one in a baby carriage left outside a supermarket, snatches it up, takes it home. Is now happily cackling over it, while a frantic mother somewhere is tearing out her hair. And the old man, half crazy with fear and worry, decides to confide in a stranger who's obviously intelligent, sympathetic, and resourceful.

"First, we've got to return the bambino," I told him. "Then Serafina had better throw herself on the mercy of the court. We'll plead temporary insanity."

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The old man blinked faster behind his patched-up glasses. "Why for bambino, Chief?" he said. "Serafina she's a pussycat. You talk kidnap. I think kidnap. *I* say Serafina she's a kidnap."

"Are you trying to tell us," Joanie cut in, "that someone kidnaped your cat?"

I said, annoyed, "I'll handle this, please." Then I poked a finger toward the old guy. "Let me kapish this good, paisan. Somebody kidnaped a pussycat belonging to you?"

The poor guy then poured out his pitiful tale. His name was Luigi. He shared life with Serafina, who was the solace and comfort of his old age. Yesterday afternoon—I was able to pinpoint the time to 4:20 p.m.—he brought Serafina a pork liver he purchased in a butcher shop on Bleecker Street. Opening the door to his flat, he became alarmed when Serafina failed to meet him with her usual happy, welcome-home-Papa greetings. He rushed inside, searched the flat. Alas, his beloved Serafina was gone. Vanished!

Upon further interrogation—and I worked him over pretty thoroughly in order to establish this important fact—he swore up and down and sideways that Serafina had *not* scooted out past his legs when he entered his flat. He also pointed out—with considerable astuteness, I thought—that even aside from Serafina's unquestioned loyalty and devotion to him, she never would have abandoned him while she could smell the pork liver in the paper bag he'd been holding.

He seemed vague when, among other things, I asked him if the lock on his door was of the type that could be opened with a hairpin. But he did admit that two of his windows faced a rear fire escape, thus providing easy entry into his flat.

At this point Joanie, restlessing on the bench next to me, said in her simple manner, ignoring *all* the evidence I'd been careful to establish, "Look, my cat sometimes vanishes for a day or two. But she always comes back. I'll bet Serafina is back meowing outside your door this very minute."

Some of the misery lifted off Luigi's wrinkled pan. "You think so?" he said hopefully. "Okay, I go look."

He creaked to his feet, slung his box, and shuffled away.

"Bernie Halper—*honestly!*" Joanie said, rolling her eyes in a ridiculous attitude of helpless bewilderment. "I think it was mean of you to confuse and torment that poor old man with all those crazy questions. Why, for instance, did you ask him if he was ever a member of a Mafia gang? How could that *possibly* have had anything to do with the fact that the cat had somehow managed to sneak out of his flat? Which, I'm sure, is exactly what did happen."

There it was again: a closed mind. It seemed pointless even to try to explain the obvious to Joanie. Besides, I needed time to mull over this dramatic development: I, Bernie

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Halper, sitting peacefully on a bench in Washington Square, am suddenly given a chilling, beyond-the-curtain peek into a fiendishly clever racket.

I saw a smoke-filled room and this toadlike character addressing his henchmen. Here's the caper I've just cooked up, boys, he says—something brand-new in the history of organized crime. You pull a snatch, and you run into headaches. F.B.I. on your tail. The Lindbergh Law. A murder rap. Well, gentlemen, we're going to get around all that. Because *our* snatchees will be *pets!* Yeah, we'll get fat shaking down the squares who love their pets like their own flesh and blood!

A master plan, all right. Take Luigi. Everybody in his neighborhood knows how nuts he is about Serafina. Now Luigi must have spent fifty years shining shoes in the Park. If he was able to save just five bucks a week—why, he'd be worth close to $13,000, and that's *not* counting compound interest. Old Luigi is loaded.

Okay, so they snatch Serafina and give Luigi a couple of days to get good and frantic. Then he receives a note and the lopped-off tip of Serafina's tail. Come through with the do-re-me, the note says, or you'll find the rest of Serafina's tail in the next package you get. Of course Luigi will pay anything to get his beloved Serafina back. And Serafina, glad to be back home, will curl up and go to sleep. *She's* not going to give the police any information . . .

"Please don't go into another trance, Bernie," Joanie said. "Let's *do* something."

Old Luigi, I noticed, was still in sight shuffling along the path. I sat up and said, "Yes, let's. Luigi said he's going home. We'll go along with him. Look around his place. Maybe we'll stumble onto some clue that, reported to the police, may quickly crack the case."

Joanie shut her eyes, opened them, and then gaily waved me on. "Be seein' you, old pal," she said. "I'll check with your mother when the visiting hours are. Over at the nuthouse, I mean. And I'll bring you goodies every week."

That didn't bother me as I set off after Luigi. All forward-thinking persons must develop an armor against the jeering skepticism of their inferiors. I caught up with Luigi, told him what I planned to do. He just said, "Yeah, sure, Chief," and went on mumbling in Italian as he plodded ahead.

We were leaving the Park—and to keep abreast of Luigi you had to walk as if your pants were down around your ankles—when Joanie suddenly bobbed up next to me. She took my arm and said, "Hi." I answered, "Hi," and let it go at that. When you got right down to it, Joanie was a loyal chick. So—forgive and forget.

We kept slowpoking along, Luigi finally leading us into one of those slummy East Side streets. He paused before a tenement stoop next to a

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Chinese laundry that had the intriguing name of *Charlie Ho* lettered in red paint on its window. The tenement, though, looked pretty creepy even for *that* neighborhood. Broken steps. One guard rail sagging crazily toward the window of the laundry. Open vestibule door that suggested an entrance to some dark, fetid tunnel.

His foot up on the first step, Luigi turned and asked me, "Maybe you change you mind, huh, Chief?"

"I have," Joanie said. "Bernie, I'm not going in *there*."

"Sure, you stay outside," I told her. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, notify the police."

"You mean," said Joanie, "you don't want me to see the silly look on your face when we find Serafina waiting outside Luigi's door. No, I'll go along with you."

I understood, of course, what had really influenced Joanie's decision, and it made for a fine, warm moment. But it only lasted a moment. You see, I happened to glance again at the laundry window, possibly because I was still charmed by the name Charlie Ho. And suddenly I found myself sucked into a most *extraordinary* development!

You might guess what Joanie said. But the fact is it had nothing whatever to do with all those old Sax Rohmer yarns I'd been amusing myself with lately. Opium dens. Yellow menaces. After *all,* I'm not some impressionable kid. No, it was strictly observation and deduction.

The plump Oriental behind the ironing board was staring straight smack back at me. Which, in itself, was pretty peculiar. A Chinese laundryman wouldn't have stopped working even if Harry Truman, in New York and taking one of his walks, had bobbed up outside his window.

Furthermore, I could clearly see beads of sweat on Charlie Ho's round yellow face. Now anyone *normally* prone to perspire that way—on a cool October afternoon—couldn't work as a laundryman. Outraged customers yapping about sweat-stained shirts. Inevitable collapse from dehydration. Hopeless odds that would have compelled Charlie Ho to pursue some other occupation.

No, I was observing a behavior pattern that, definitely, was abnormal. And then I had further dramatic proof of that. Smoke began to curl from beneath the flatiron that Charlie Ho held resting over some garment on the ironing board. He snatched up the iron, and he did look sort of like Fu Manchu at that, as he scurried away to vanish in some back room of the laundry.

Well! I was only vaguely aware of Luigi starting up the stoop, of me following him, of Joanie making some comment about a germ mask. My thoughts were racing as I tried to focus logic and reason onto the remarkable exhibition I had just witnessed.

Fear and guilt must have been

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responsible for Charlie Ho's behavior. Triggered off because he saw *us* outside his window. Well, what exactly did he see? First, the fact that Luigi came home at a time of day when he was supposed to be shining shoes in the Park. Second, that two strangers accompanied Luigi. What gives? asks Charlie Ho. Who *are* those two strangers?

Now I have known for years that I look very mature for my age. Charlie Ho decides I'm an F.B.I. man. Joanie looks kind of young and naive, but wouldn't the subtle Oriental mind immediately deduce that her innocent appearance was precisely *the* reason why she'd be effective as a policewoman?

It began to add up. Charlie Ho became panicky because he believed that a G-man and a policewoman had come home with Luigi to launch an investigation of Serafina's disappearance.

At this point, though, things got murky again. Despite what some people maintain about me, I *don't* go off half-cocked on wild and far-fetched speculations. Oh, like immediately assuming that Charlie Ho had fingered the Serafina-Luigi caper. Quite the contrary, I couldn't see a Chinese laundryman as toad-like Mr. Big's henchman in that smoke-filled room. Totally out of character. If Charlie Ho were partial toward the easy buck, he'd have dealt in opium or operated a crooked fantan game.

All of which underscored the baffling mystery now confronting me: if *ransom* wasn't Charlie Ho's objective, then what other *possible* motive could he have for snatching Serafina?

By this time we had climbed to the second floor of the tenement. Luigi, pausing at a door that had a panel of frosted glass, looked up and down the dim hallway.

"Pussycat she no come back," he sadly told Joanie.

"Don't worry, she'll show up," Joanie answered with a brash assurance that I thought was completely idiotic.

Luigi sighed, drew from his pocket a long, old-type key that could probably be duplicated in any five-and-dime, unlocked the door, and waved for Joanie and me to go on in.

I expected us to start traversing passageways through piled-to-the-ceiling junk that for years Luigi had been scavenging off the streets. To my surprise, however, the two small rooms of which the flat consisted were quite clean and tidy. The door off the hallway led into the kitchen, which had a fat old coal stove, a table and a couple of chairs, an icebox, and a gray square sink. The other room was furnished with a bed and bureau, and had religious pictures plastered all over its walls. Though Joanie was wrinkling her nose, I found the odor permeating the place—a combination of shoe polish, garlic, and strong tobacco—rather intriguing.

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Anyway, now that I had satisfied my natural curiosity about what an old shoeshine man would call Home Sweet Home, my mind returned to the grim business at hand. First, how had Serafina been spirited away? Through the easily unlocked door? Or down the fire escape that I could see outside the two bedroom windows?

I went over to check those windows. Both were unlocked. Raising one of them, I looked down through the lattice of the fire escape at the rubbish-littered backyard behind the tenement. I could see the rear ground-floor exit from the building and several garbage cans next to it. But there was still another door on the other side of the cans. A screen door.

Glancing over my shoulder, I asked Luigi, "What name fella belong screen door by-'m'-by bottom fire escape?"

"Chinese wash man," Luigi replied.

Yes, I suspected that. Charlie Ho was our boy, all right. The guilty fear oozing out of every pore of his slanty-eyed kisser. And now—proof of how *easy* it was for him to engineer the snatch. He simply waits until he sees Luigi take off with the shoeshine box. Then he scoots up the fire escape, climbs in. A well-ripened fish extended toward Serafina, a chloroform-soaked sponge concealed behind his back. In a few seconds it's all over. A cinch.

But I was still absolutely stymied insofar as the all-important matter of motive was concerned. What in heaven's name would Charlie Ho *want* with Serafina?

Shaking my head, I lowered the window and returned to the kitchen. And then a possible explanation suddenly slithered across my mind. It was suggested by the big, blackened pot on Luigi's stove.

The Chinese have been known to revel in certain culinary delicacies repugnant to the Western palate. If they could drool over the prospect of chomping on a hundred-year-old egg . . .

"Is Serafina a young, plump pussycat?" I asked Luigi.

"There you *go* again!" said Joanie.

And Luigi said, "Serafina she's young, she's plump. Now maybe pretty quick you finish up, Chief?"

"Just one more question," I said. "Charlie Ho ever see Serafina?"

"Yeah, some time I sit on stoop with—" Luigi paused, his eyes narrowing. "Why you ask that?"

It put me on a bit of a spot. For I could well anticipate what I would unleash if I explained that Serafina had ended up between a couple of chopsticks. Luigi grabs a butcher knife and goes howling downstairs. Charlie Ho tries to defend himself with his flatirons. Bashes in Luigi's skull just as he's skewered on the butcher knife. Blood all over people's laundry. A messeroo.

So to avoid carnage I said, "Need witness: Kapish? Some guy who can prove you're telling the truth."

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Well, I should have thought of a more diplomatic cover-up, because it made old Luigi blow a gasket. Pointing a trembling finger to a dish on the floor that had dried milk scum on it, he practically shrieked, "You think *I* eat offa that?"

I backed away as he lumbered past me toward the bottle of wine and a tumbler on the kitchen table.

"You go now, Chief," he said, scowling. "Goom by!"

Something in Luigi's eye made me decide not to argue. We went, and he slammed the door behind us.

"Bernie," Joanie said in the hall. "If *you* don't think this silly business has gone far enough—"

"Wait," I said. "Just be quiet a moment."

There was a tightness in my chest. For it had suddenly dawned on me that I had latched onto something of immense importance, with possible world-wide implications.

Only yesterday, all the New York papers had carried front page stories about a Chinese who ran amok with a gun on Mott Street, wounding three of his fellow Orientals and a policeman named O'Shaughnessy before he could make his getaway.

Now I was in position to top that story with a real shocker: a Chinese replenishes his larder with the beloved cat-companion of a lonely old man. It's printed in the New York papers. The wire services pick it up. Tens of thousands of outraged animal lovers throughout the nation begin frothing at the mouth.

But does it stop there? Oh, no! Red China interprets it as deliberate, Pentagon-inspired propaganda. Why? To justify certain secret hostile acts planned against her. So the jittery boys in Peiping decide *they'd* better strike first. There's a sneak attack on Formosa. A counterattack by the Seventh Fleet. World conflagration. An H-bomb wipes out New York. I see my own mother—

"Let's get out of here," I groaned to Joanie. "No man should play God."

I started down the stairs. Joanie, behind me, went off into some irrelevant gibberish about my mother's youthful appearance, no gray hair, no wild, haggard look in her eyes. I paid no attention to it because I now had something else on my mind.

There was one other simple investigatory move I could make that wouldn't trigger off any H-bombs. Since Charlie Ho wasn't likely to want a mounted trophy of Serafina, *that* part of her had to be disposed of somewhere. And there were the garbage cans I had seen near his back door. Why not take a fast peek into those cans? Just to complete my personal files, so to speak.

Therefore, when we reached the ground floor, I circled around to the rear door and, ignoring the yelp of protest from Joanie, went out into the backyard. It soon turned out to be a waste of time and effort. The Sanitation Department had evidently already been at those garbage cans. Nothing in them.

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I shrugged, now definitely prepared to detach myself from the case until the time when I'd include it in my memoirs. Only, as it happened, in checking the last garbage can, I had ended up within a couple of feet of Charlie Ho's screen door.

There really was no *special* reason why I edged over to peek through the screen. It merely gained me a view of a dimly lighted room that held nothing of interest. But I did notice a big, elderly-looking refrigerator along one wall. It caught and held my eye only because it seemed odd to see even a beat-up old refrigerator in a Chinese laundryman's squalid quarters. Well, Charlie Ho had probably acquired it because there was bad blood between him and the local iceman. I was about to let it go at that, when another thought suddenly cut in.

Less than twenty-four hours had elapsed since Serafina's abduction. Why take it for granted that she had already gone through the cookpot phase? Charlie Ho might be *saving* her for some special occasion. If so, then of course she'd be in that refrigerator!

Naturally it forced my next move. I tried the screen door, half hoping to find it locked. It wasn't. My heart began to beat faster. Come on, Bernie, I thought, don't chicken out. Charlie Ho is up front sweating over his ironing board. You sneak in, case the refrigerator, and you take off—records completed.

I pushed the door inward, winced at the slight squeak it made, assured myself that Charlie Ho couldn't have heard that tiny sound. Then I sidled in, gently closing the door behind me. I took exactly one step toward the refrigerator, when a harsh light went on overhead.

"Stay right where you are!" a voice clipped.

And I found myself facing a brutal-looking character with a gun!

Another man now came through a curtained doorway. He wasn't armed—not so you could see it, anyway—and he wore a blue suit while the man with the gun wore a brown suit. Otherwise they were pretty much alike: typical criminal faces that one could see in any Rogues' Gallery.

Everything froze in me except my stomach muscles, which tried to shrink away from the muzzle of the revolver pointing straight at my belt buckle. Holy smoke, I thought, the laundry is a blind. I am trapped in a gangsters' hideout. I'm now a mouth that could blab. And they'll soon take care of *that* . . . Honest to God, if my hair didn't stand on end, it should have!

Blue Suit said, "What've you got there?"

"Answer the man," Brown Suit said, his mean little eyes boring into mine.

"Well," I said, "my name is Bernie Halper and I live on Waverly Place and I am a junior at the—" I had to pause to clear my throat. "I mean, what would you like to know?"

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Brown Suit put away the gun, evidently launching some sadistic cat-and-mouse game with me. "Why did you sneak in here?"

"Oh, *that*," I said.

The screen door squeaked behind me, and Joanie, poking her head in, asked, "Are you all right, Bernie?"

"He's fine and dandy," Brown Suit said. "Join the party, Sis. Who are you?"

Joanie marched inside and said in her high clear voice, "I am Joan Paine Webster and my father is a lawyer. Come on, Bernie, we're going home."

"Oh, no, you're not," Brown Suit said.

"Oh, yes, we are," said Joanie. "Unless you want me to start screaming for the police."

My legs got wobbly when I saw Brown Suit reach into his pocket. Instead of a weapon, though, he produced a badge. "We *are* the police, Sis," he said. "My name is Hogan. This is Detective Russo. And you two are going to answer some questions."

Oh, brother! Just to be able to breathe again was a marvelously thrilling sensation. Why, those two guys were cops—detectives using the back of the laundry to guzzle beer chilled for them in Charlie Ho's refrigerator while they were supposed to be out chasing crooks. A fine commentary on New York's Finest!

"Well?" said Hogan. "I want to know what you are doing here."

Joanie looked at me. "Bernie, what *are* we doing here?"

"We're looking for Serafina, remember?" I said. Then I explained to Hogan, "Serafina is a pussycat. A cat, I mean."

"A pussycat kind of a cat, huh?" Hogan said. "Let's try *this* on for size. Uncle paid you to sneak in and check if any strangers—like cops—might be hanging around here. Right?"

I stared at this maniac, entrusted by the City to guard life and property. "I don't want to be rude," I said, "but I must point out to you that what you just said absolutely makes no sense. Only uncle I've got is my Uncle Ben, and he sells insurance in Toledo, Ohio. Even if Uncle Ben *were* in New York—"

"Charlie Ho's uncle," Hogan cut in, a nasty rasp now in his voice. "The crazy old Chinaman who went on a shooting spree yesterday afternoon and who's still loose somewhere. *That* uncle."

"Oh," I said. "But why should you be looking for him here? It happened in Chinatown."

Hogan rasped, "We were tipped off he planned to come here and—Look, *I'll* ask the questions. What's this business about your searching for a cat?"

A flash of intuition warned me to watch my step. For things had gone beyond my fear of unleashing forces that might destroy the civilized world. These two detectives hadn't even the sense to realize that, of

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course, Uncle was being hidden out in the catacombs beneath Chinatown's streets, probably sucking on an opium pipe to quiet his nerves. Therefore it'd be in character with them to decide that my explanation rated incarceration in some mental ward. And once you're in one of those Snake Pits, you don't get out in a hurry. I'd probably *go* nuts.

So, taking a middle course, so to speak, I told Hogan, "Miss Webster and I were merely trying to be Good Samaritans. We were on a bench in Washington Square when Luigi, an old shoeshine man who lives in this building, informed us that his cat, Serafina, had vanished. He seemed quite heartbroken about it, so Miss Webster and I volunteered to go home with him and—well, try to find Serafina." I turned to Joanie. "That's about the gist of it, isn't it?"

"No, looking for the cat was strictly your own silly idea," Joanie replied. "And it still doesn't explain why you barged in here."

My pal! Whose side was she on, anyway? I said coldly, "Serafina might have sneaked down the rear fire escape. That's why I searched the yard. Then I happened to glance through the screen door and I *thought* I spotted Serafina near the refrigerator there. I figured maybe Charlie Ho had an unpleasant mice problem and had beguiled Serafina inside in order to—"

Detective Russo, the silent partner, said, "I've had enough of Serafina."

"So have I," said Joanie. "Now may we please get out of here?"

"You may," Russo nodded. "I suggest you carry a butterfly net on your next date with this—"

This would-be humor was suddenly aborted by singsong Chinese voices that began jabbering in the laundry up front. Both detectives whirled and plunged through the curtained doorway.

I looked at the refrigerator. After enduring a nerve-racking ordeal that probably aged me, the least I could do was to complete my mission and salvage *something*.

I darted across the room. And I was literally touching the door handle of the refrigerator when Hogan's voice rasped, "*Now* what are you up to?"

Honestly! I jerked my hand away, turned to Hogan. The expression on his face was pretty ominous. Stall for time, Bernie, I thought frantically, or you'll end up in a strait jacket.

"So Uncle walked right into your clever little trap, eh?" I said. "Gee, the City of New York can sure rest easier with men like you and Detective Russo—"

"It was only a wet-wash delivery," Hogan interrupted. "What did you want in that refrigerator?"

Russo, also re-entering the room, said, "So we're now involved with a refrigerator, eh?"

"There's something so peculiar about this kid," Hogan said, "it makes my teeth ache."

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Joanie said, "Bernie is *not* peculiar. Simply because he sometimes gets unusual ideas—"

"You keep out of this," Hogan snapped. His eyes returned to me. "Well? Why did you sneak over to the refrigerator?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly willing to explain," I said, hoping that some explanation would occur to me as I went along. "There's this theory I've been kicking around in my mind, see? Maybe Uncle came here yesterday, right after he shot up those people in Chinatown. Charlie Ho, panicky, says you can't stay here, Honorable Uncle. The police are bound to raid my humble establishment. But an old shoeshine man has a flat right above here. He lives alone and I saw him leave for the Park. So scoot up the rear fire escape, Honorable Uncle. And hurry! Time is of the essence."

I paused to catch my breath, and Hogan said, "I'm not giving you a screen test. Get to the point, will you?"

"I'm trying to," I said. "Serafina obviously got out of Luigi's flat when Uncle raised the window in order to get in. You see? Uncle gets *in*, Serafina gets *out*."

They both just stared at me. Well, it didn't take a trained police mind to spot the hole in my story. Serafina, seeing a sinister armed Chinese climbing through the window, would immediately have sought the darkest corner under the bed and *stayed* there.

But, apparently, even that didn't penetrate. Russo sighed and said, "*And* we're back to Serafina."

"The refrigerator, Bernie," Hogan said softly. "Remember?"

"Oh, that," I said. And then, in the last, desperate moment, I had a flash of inspiration. "Charlie Ho knew, of course, that Luigi would be coming home after a while. So another hiding place had to be prepared for Uncle. Well, you'd be looking for a live man, not a corpse. No reason for you to check the refrigerator. So Charlie Ho shuts off the current, takes out the shelves, drills some air holes in the back where you couldn't see them. Climb in, Honorable Uncle, he says. And—well, that was my theory."

Joanie said, "Bernie Halper, you *are* crazy!"

"Thanks," I said bitterly.

And Hogan said to Russo, "Look, Russo, I'm not going to leave myself open to blackmail. You agree we ought to check the refrigerator?"

"I agree," Russo answered.

Hogan drew his gun and motioned to me to get out of the way.

"Please remember," I said quickly, "it was just a theory. Simply a bit of harmless mental exercise—"

Hogan swung open the refrigerator door. The skinny little old Chinese man inside must have been leaning against it, because he made a Jack-in-the-box kind of flying leap into the room.

Joanie let loose with a screech that could have served as an air raid

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siren. Uncle's hat fell off as he hit the floor, and he made a feeble effort to lift the big blue automatic in his right hand. Russo snatched it away from him. Then Uncle just lay there, his face purplish as he gasped for breath.

I felt pretty gaspy, too. I hadn't told them the exact number and positions of the air holes I could see in the rear wall of the refrigerator, but, good Lord, maybe I could have! Bernie Dunninger Halper!

"You two," Hogan clipped to Joanie and me. "Grab some ozone."

Joanie said in a choked voice, "Yes, sir."

She ran out through the screen door. I envisioned her blind, hysterical flight terminating beneath the wheels of a truck, and so I had to chase out after her. A few seconds later I practically bowled over Luigi, starting up the stoop. Joanie made a moaning sound and came to a halt.

And it was then that I saw a plump orange kitty, pursued by several huge and hideous tomcats, scorch across the street toward the stoop. Luigi bawled, "Serafina!" The kitty leaped into his arms. The frustrated Romeos dispersed, eying balefully that scene of joyous reunion.

"Why, this is *it,* Joanie!" I said, almost shouting in my excitement. "It's *the* key to the entire mystery! Serafina dared to scoot past Uncle, when he climbed through the window, because she was governed by a force greater than fear. *It was her time to become a mother!*"

"Bernie, I'm fond of you," Joanie said in a low-level voice. "I like being with you. But don't *explain* anything to me. *I* didn't see anyone—wearing a hat, yet!—popping out of a refrigerator. It never happened. Just a bad dream. And now let's please get *away* from here!"

All right, live and let live. But I had a fine, satiated feeling as we walked back toward Washington Square. The record was fairly impressive. I had solved the whys and wherefores of Serafina's disappearance. I had brought about the capture of a dangerous homicidal maniac. Two New York detectives, promoted because they caught Uncle, would always remember with deep gratitude the name of Bernie Halper. All in all, a pretty creditable afternoon's work.

And in the next stunned moment I realized I was in the biggest jam of my entire life!

Charlie Ho undoubtedly overheard me give Hogan my name and address. So he'd *know* who was responsible for the padding in Uncle's cell and the plain walls in his own. A fellow Tong member comes to see him on visiting day. *Bernie Halper, Waverly Place,* Charlie Ho hisses through the grill. The fellow Tong member's eyes slant up and hood over. Off he pads. The Tong hold a special meeting. Certain gruesome arrangements are completed. And Hatchet Men go padding out into the night!

Ice was slithering up my spine.

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But then another thought strikes me. Maybe I was underestimating the subtle Oriental mind? Might not Charlie Ho correctly interpret my contribution as something for which he should be eternally grateful?

With the two detectives staked out in the laundry, Charlie Ho can't check on Uncle, can't tell that the airholes in the refrigerator are inadequate. Result: Uncle suffocates. Trying to dispose of the body, Charlie Ho is caught and charged with murder. A black pall of disgrace hangs over Charlie Ho, his Tong, all Chinatown.

But *now,* thanks to Bernie Halper, the new miracle drugs adjust the loose wheels in Uncle's skull. Charlie Ho serves a short sentence and, rested up and rarin' to go, returns happily to his ironing board. And an anonymous donor sends me a package containing a hunk of priceless jade.

Could be.

Just the same, I'm keeping my fingers crossed...

"Q"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PAT STADLEY**

TITLE: ***The Doe and the Gantlet***

TYPE: Crime Story

CRIMINALS: The Ghost Riders

LOCALE: A suburb in Southern California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The six teen-agers in the motorcycle gang had the "coolest setup"—plenty of loot, and safe as houses. But they weren't satisfied with just loot . . .Strong meat, superbly told.*

I KNEW WARD WAS WATCHING THE place every time we rode our motorcycles up the small canyon in back of the house. It was one we had on our list—big and rich-looking, but no servants and lots of shrubbery around the fence.

There was a little hill that moved right up to the fence and today Ward gunned his motor and I saw the woman sit up on the pad by the swimming pool and look at us.

She was really something to see. Little in the right places and full where she ought to be and with a sunsuit that wouldn't interfere with her tanning. I was looking so hard I nearly ran up on Ward who'd stopped his motor and was watching her, keeping his back straight and flexing his muscles under his T shirt.

Ward's proud of his build and he's always ragging us to work out and we usually do what he says because there's nobody I know that's going to cross Ward. Not in our gang, the Ghost Riders, nor in any others we tangle with, even counting the Night Hawks.

I gave our gang its name because we ride at night with no lights, picking the main highways and helling it down between the traffic. You ought to see people's eyes when we come roaring up on them, shagging in and out of the cars. And suppose the cops pick us up—what's a five buck traffic ticket to us?

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You see, we've got dough. Real dough. And we keep the gang down to six, though other guys are always hinting about joining up. But Ward says too many guys and somebody'd be talking.

We got the coolest setup you ever seen. We ride our cycles up the canyons just outside the little towns and right on up to the top of the hills. Then we cut the motors and take out the glasses and we can look clear around and down on all the houses on the little hills.

And Ward takes out our list and we sit and watch the owners come and go and how many people there are and what kind of dogs. Everything. Hell, I bet we know more about who lives in the Oaks and the Woods and all the other fancy name places and what they do and how much dough they got—more than even the coppers know.

Sometimes we sit up there and pretty soon we know to the second when Mr. Money Bags is going to leave and go to his smoker and where the prowl cars are—and when we've got them figured good we pick out one and then one night we visit the place and load up.

We hide the loot, then climb back on the cycles, drop over the hills, and come out in the next town over. And if anybody asks questions—well, we're just riding the fire trails.

It beats holding up nervous service station managers for two bits or trigger-happy liquor owners on the off chance you might get a haul.

So you can see why Ward stopped. Even though the house was on our list, we hadn't pinpointed it yet and so we hadn't spotted the doll. We all stopped and stared until she turned her back on us and lay down again. I could hear Neil breathing behind me but it was Ward I was watching. There aren't many women that'd turn their backs to him.

When he kicked that motor, he really laid to it and he took off spinning, his rear wheel spitting dirt in my face. But on the other side of the hill he'd cooled down and we eased our way between the trees and turned north into a long, narrow canyon. There was a little waterfall at the end and a pool big enough to get wet in.

We were almost there when we spotted the doe. She'd evidently come down for water and our motors had kept driving her back into the canyon until now she was trapped, with cliffs on both sides and no place to go except between us.

She stood looking at us, ears pricked forward, her head lifted, her coat kind of red-gold in the sunlight. Bob looked at me, his face flushed and excited, and then he drove his motorcycle straight at her. Of course he couldn't touch her—she sprung away from him, but we fell in right behind him and formed a little circle. When we saw he'd missed, I went next.

I popped the clutch and shot forward and when she jumped, I

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leaned away from her so that the rear wheel spun, flipping the sand, and I was so close I could see the fear in her eyes.

Ward sat back and watched us and we drove that doe near crazy, here and there, around in circles. She broke through Milo once and it was all we could do to turn her and Ward just sat and laughed like crazy. Then, suddenly, she stood still in the middle of the circle and I could see the white of her eyes and her smooth, brown hide getting all wet with sweat. Then Ward waved us back, stood up, and kicked over on his starter.

He rode straight for her. And she stood there like she was waiting for him, her sides heaving, and when he was on her, she reared back on her hind legs and struck out like lightning with her front hoofs, and I thought, "There goes Ward's face which he's so proud of."

But like I said, Ward is all muscle and his reflexes are really fast. He ducked just in time and her hoofs caught him in the shoulder and he went down in a tangled heap under his motor. Then she was over him in one big leap, between Tim and me, and down the canyon.

Milo and Bob ran for Ward, pulling the cycle off him and I thought he'd clip somebody, he was so mad. Nobody laughed and I wouldn't have crossed him at that moment for all the loot we got stashed away. His face and shirt were dirtied from where he'd landed, and blood was coming from the scratch on his shoulder.

We weren't sure just what was coming off, so we just sat on our motorcycles and looked at him. Suddenly he laughed, although I could see his eyes were still wild-looking and then we all laughed too. We laughed so hard we fell off the cycles, and we pounded one another and then we opened the beer we'd brought and the fifth I'd swiped from my old man, and we sat down and drank and it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to us.

And pretty soon it got dark. I lit the lantern and the shadows came out kind of red on the ground and the whiskey was warm in our stomachs, and then I saw Ward was getting real quiet and I figured maybe we were going to knock over another house, although we'd hit one already that week.

He got on his cycle and we followed him and when he got to the top of the hill he took out the glasses and he sat looking down at the house by the little hill, and even without the glasses we could see the lights winking in the pool.

Then he kicked his starter. "Come on," he said, "let's take a house."

We came down the canyon quiet and we cut the motors about a block away. We came the rest of the way on foot. When we got to the little hill, we wriggled forward till we could see over it and into the yard and it was plenty peaceful-looking.

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There was just the lights from the pool and Ward held us pinned down to the earth a full fifteen minutes, and then he crawled to the fence and we went right behind him.

We were over it quick and half of us slipped through the shrubbery to one side and the other three down the other, and then we'd reached the patio and Ward was about to step on it when we saw the woman move inside. We dropped to the ground in a hurry and she came out on the patio and stood there in her bare feet looking over the pool toward the mountains.

She had on one of those short nightgowns and her legs were slim and brown and she raised an arm upward and stretched and it was then Ward stepped out on the cement.

She froze right there. I watched her and I don't think she even breathed, and then all the rest of us came out and I was so close I could smell the perfume she was wearing.

She took one look over her shoulder at me and I could see her brown eyes widen and then the same thing hit all of us. She was just like the doe, brown and quivering, and I could see Ward reach up and rub his shoulder lightly and smile, and I'd never seen him look like that before.

And then she was past him just as he reached for her and his fingers touched the softness of her gown and she was running for the pool. Tim stepped toward her and Neil closed in from the other side, but she slipped between them and cut the water cleanly in the prettiest dive I've ever seen.

I don't know which of us was more surprised—Ward, I guess, though he was still smiling a little. Then we all moved around the pool and we stood there and watched her come to the surface.

She came up in the deep end and treaded water for a moment, that shortie gown floating around her. She turned in a little circle looking up at us and I could see that she was more frightened than even the doe had been. I could hear the other guys sucking in their breath and I felt the same way—kind of icy cold inside and my heart pounding so hard I couldn't hardly hear anything.

Then I looked at Ward. He was hunched down by the edge, his fingers trailing in the water, and he nodded. I threw off my jacket, knelt down, and took off my boots. She kept her eyes on me, her hands moving in the green water.

I'm a pretty good swimmer and I dove to the side of her, figuring I'd have a little fun before I grabbed her, but when I'd surfaced she was behind me and before I could turn, she'd clipped me right across the neck muscles and in under the ear. I yelped, then she was on me and shoved my head under the water, and when I took that quick breath, I breathed water instead and came up sputtering and gagging. Milo had to reach down and haul me up on

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the cement and they all stood there and laughed at me.

Then Tim went in the water after her and I pushed myself up to watch. Tim's pretty good in the water and he's got long arms. He paddled around her, flicking a hand at her once or twice. But she stayed just out of reach, not wasting any energy and watching him. And when he made a rush for her, she dropped to the bottom, and when she'd surfaced she was a good five feet away from him. He turned over and swam lazily for the edge of the pool and climbed out. But his face was a little red.

Milo had stretched out on a pad and he'd plugged the little portable radio in and I could hear the music coming, soft but solid. Music really sends Milo and you could see his face light up when Ward nodded at him. But Milo's built something like an ape. He's slow on the ground and slower in the water and it was duck soup for her to stay out of his way. It was just like she was teasing him the way she'd twist or just roll away. But it really wasn't that—she was just conserving her strength, using it only when she really had to. And you could see it was getting through to the guys.

Bob didn't do any better than the rest of us but he kept after her longer and I could see she was beginning to tire now.

Then I looked at Neil. He'd been sitting beside me, snapping his fingers to the music and breathing kind of heavy. He'd already gotten out of his boots and when Ward looked at him he hit the water fast. For the first few times she stayed away from him but her turns were slower and it took her longer to dive. Then he got an arm around her and I could see her go limp against him and I thought for a minute the fun was all over. And so did Neil, because he turned her so he could look down at her and she came to life like a wild thing, her fingernails raking his face and in a flash she was loose from him.

Neil just seemed to hang there. Then he raised a wet hand, wiped his face, looked at the blood on his fingers, and you could see the anger coming up in him and he turned toward her again. That was when Ward snapped his fingers. Neil came out of the water slow-like.

And now it was Ward's turn. He took off his boots, then his T shirt, and you could see the long, red streak where the doe had ripped him.

He slid into the water easily, the muscles cording under his skin. Nobody said anything this time. We watched him swim lazily around her, his hand washing every now and then toward her so that the water would slap into her face. Then he dove for her, bumping her and knocking her to one side, and just as quick he was around and back down the other side, so that he could clip her again.

The third time, though, she was

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all set for him. As he went by, she waited until his face was close and then she hit him as hard as she could, her fist slamming into his face. But she was tired by now and besides, the blow missed slightly, just catching his cheek. He rolled to one side, came up a foot away, and you could see the red mark her fist had made. And as he paddled water and blew the air out, I could see the excitement boiling in him.

And then he was at her again, and no matter which way she turned or dove, he stayed right behind her, but not touching her. Finally she came to the surface slowly, close to the edge where I was sitting, and her eyes were so wide I could see the terror inside her. And then Ward reached across to her, grabbed a piece of her gown, gave a quick yank, and it ripped away.

She gave a little shudder and one hand reached out of the water toward me and she grabbed a boot and smashed it into Ward's face. I saw him slip under the water, the red streaming out from him and his body rolling slowly round and round.

I shouted at Tim and Bob and they hit the water together. In no time they had Ward and were pulling him over to Milo and Neil. I reached down in the pool and grabbed her and pulled her up and she came, unresisting, like all the fight had gone out of her.

And then I could see Ward beginning to move in the water and I knew he wasn't really hurt. I felt her stiffen and before I knew it, she had broken loose from me and was running to where they stood. I hollered at them but Tim and Bob were down in the water shoving Ward upward and Neil and Milo had their arms around him, pulling. They didn't hear me and they didn't see her. And then she was right beside them and she picked up the plugged-in radio by its leather handle and she stood there just a second looking down at Ward before she dropped it on him.

Not a peep came out of any of them. It was over that quick.

And I didn't wait around none. I went past her and she kind of turned a little watching me. I had to go real close to her but I didn't stop. I went straight back to the fence. I'd seen her eyes and it wasn't anything to forget. Have you ever seen a woman's eyes just after she'd killed five men?

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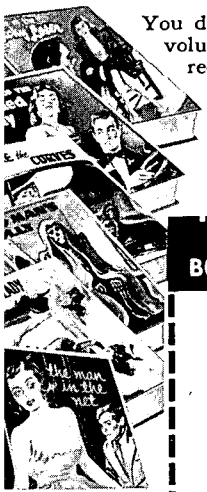

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